REVIEWED PLAYSTATION VITA + LAUNCH GAMES

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Far Cry 3 antagonist Vaas isn't the only crazy thing about Ubisoft Montreal's game – here is an FPS that encourages you to go off the rails. On p44 the team takes us on a tour of its corrupt island paradise

SAVAGE

INSIDE THE DARK HEART OF **FAR CRY 3**

HYPE

HITMAN: ABSOLUTION

XCOM: ENEMY UNKNOWN

KID ICARUS: UPRISING

NINJA GAIDEN III

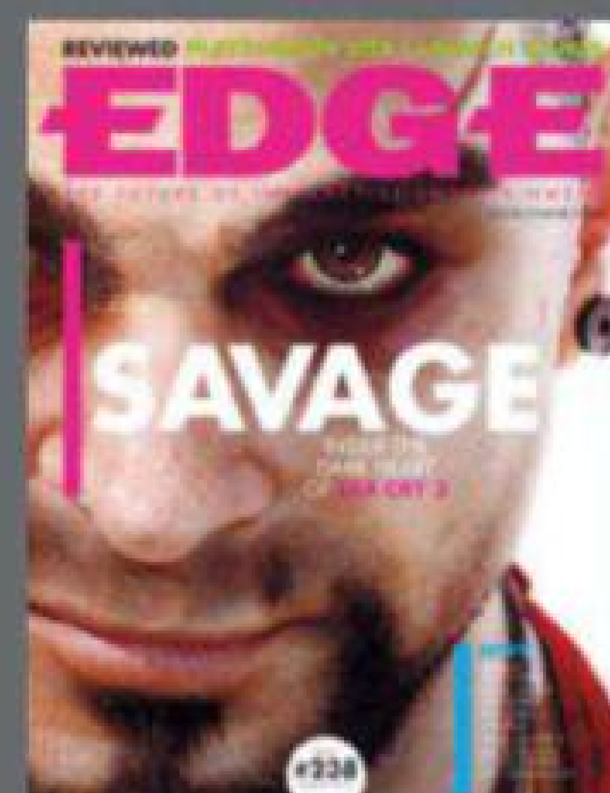
GHOST RECON: FUTURE SOLDIER

DIRT SHOWDOWN

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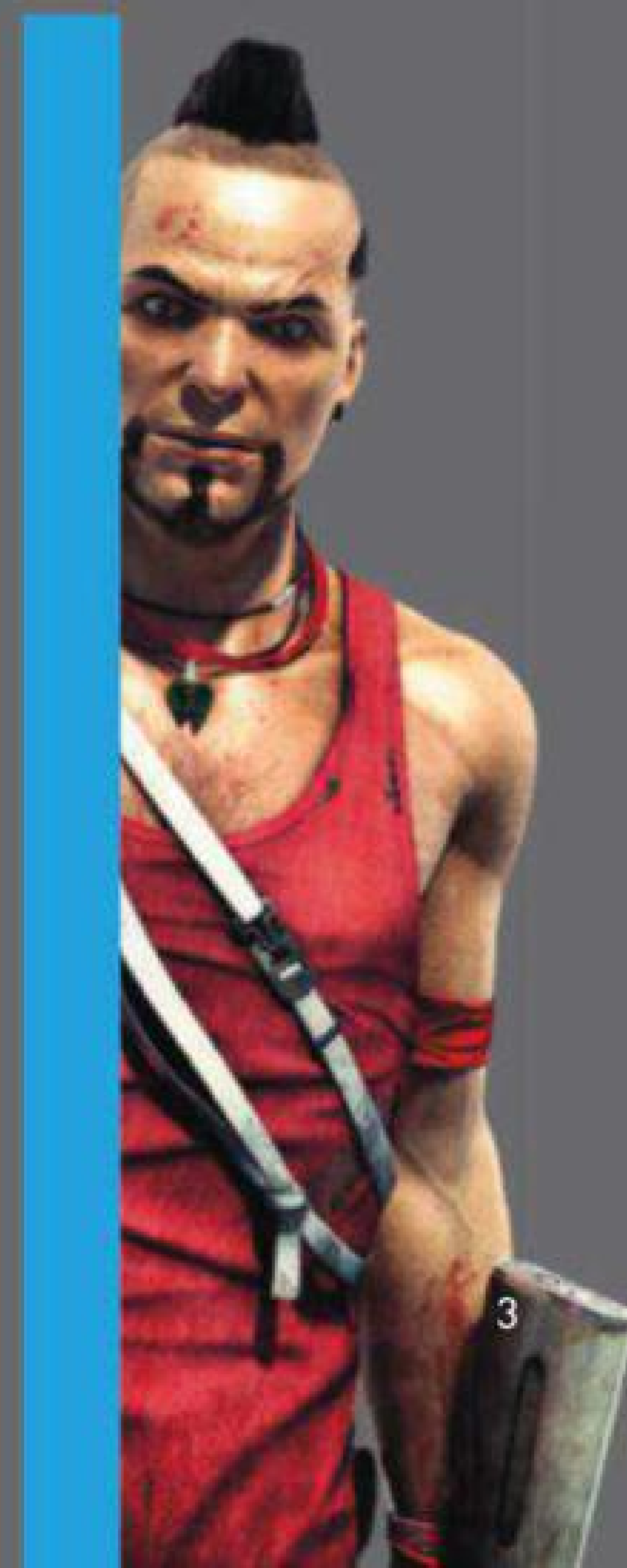
Soaking up the sights in a holiday location to die for



We've become so accustomed to having our hands held by today's breed of eager-to-please games that being let off the leash can feel disorienting. Aren't we supposed to be following this path to that building? Should we really be poking about in this cave when we know that the real action is over there? Isn't all this messing around going to... well, *break* something? And yet freedom to do what we like within an interactive space is as invigorating now as it was in 2001 when *GTAIII* broke the mould for realtime gameworlds. (What, after all, would *Skyrim* be without its desire to cut you from the apron strings and push you out of the door?) Which is why the existence of a new *Far Cry* is something to be excited about.

Far Cry 3 most closely resembles the first game in the series, an FPS often spoken of in terms of 'if only', its flaws keeping it out of the top ten when votes are cast for Best PC Game Of All Time lists. In presenting such an intoxicating open-world island setting and then forcing you to spend part of your adventure skulking through murky labs and corridors, *Far Cry* took away with one hand what it had given up so generously with the other. But it's an easy game to forgive. Pioneering works aren't always convincing across the board, and a bit of claustrophobia served with a side order of not-entirely-convincing monsters are black marks against it, but *Far Cry*'s open-endedness was a milestone in game evolution. Its ability to make you feel that you were making it all up as you went along, mixing softly-softly and all-guns-blazing strategies on the fly, contrasted starkly with the prescribed brand of stealth popular in other games of the time.

Forget about the indoor sections and bathe instead in that tropical environment, with its shimmering bays, its foliage-strewn embankments, its silt-ridden waterways and its ripe-for-the-plundering command posts, to which *Far Cry 3* has returned. This time, though, it feels like a considerably more believable place, albeit no less dangerous. On p44 we talk to the development team about how it's building a new type of threat.



games

Hype

Play







Follow these links throughout the magazine for more content online


128


134

#238

sections

MARCH 2012

Knowledge

Dispatches

Features

Create



76




138

EDGE

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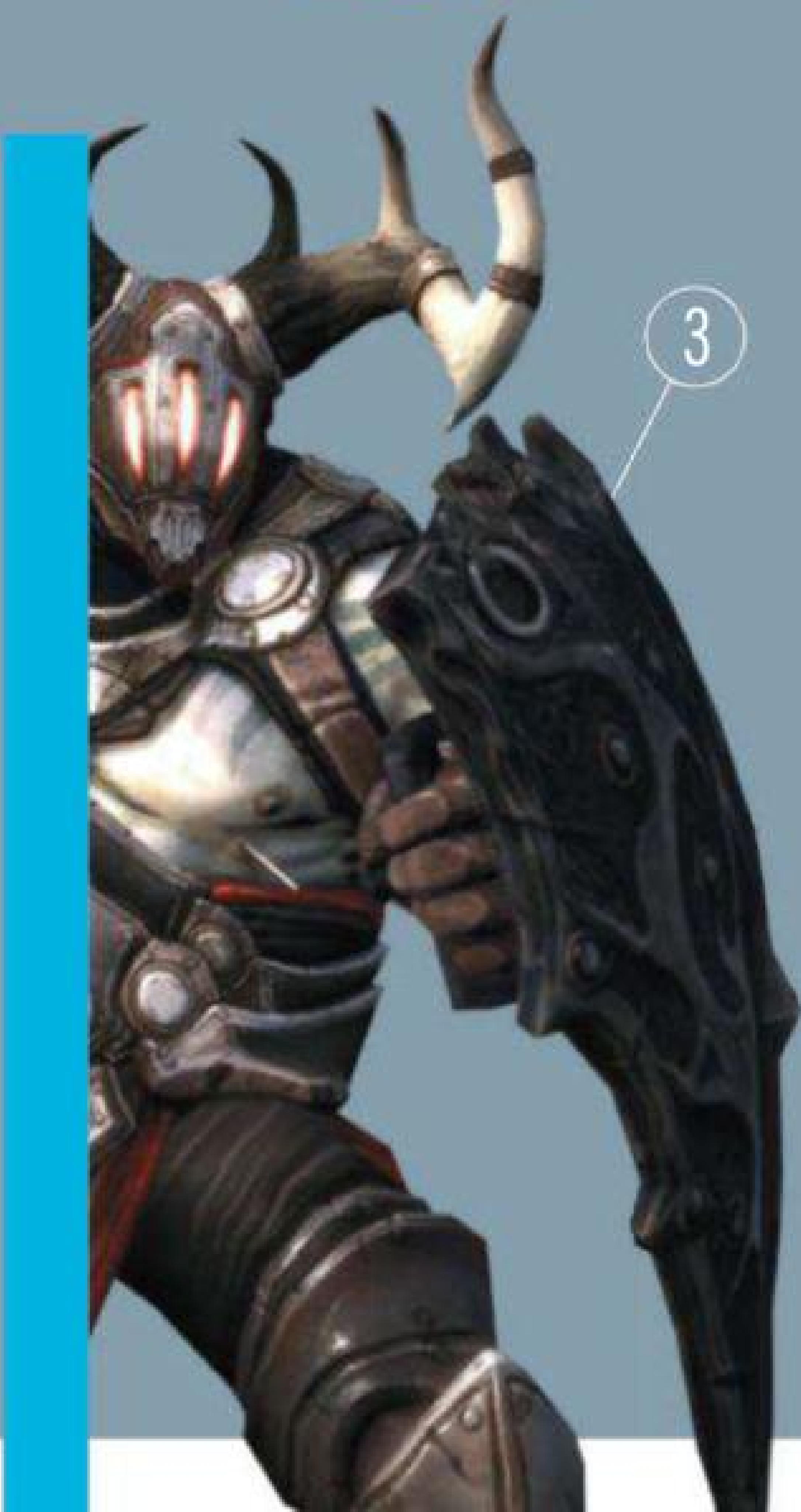
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WLEDGE

Nintendo's 3DS (1) certainly got off to a rocky start, but the release of a few key firstparty titles, and *Monster Hunter 3G* in Japan, changed the handheld's fortunes toward the end of 2011. As the system approaches its first birthday, on p10 we take a look at the reasons why it faltered, the challenges ahead, and the potential lying in wait. While we're future gazing, we catch up with Gaikai's David Perry as he foretells the death of consoles and the imminent rise of TV-based cloud gaming, which seems a little less out there now that the service will come integrated into certain LG sets (2). Then on p16, we see how modern technology is revitalising the arcade with a look at Adrenaline Amusements' Touch FX cabinets, which provide iOS games (3) with big-screen breathing room. If that has your creative juices flowing, head to p18 to discover the first details about the **Edge** Create Challenge 2012 (4). If, on the other hand, you're more of a watcher than a doer, consider the gamers honoured by Guinness World Records (5), some of whose feats we celebrate on p20. On p22's Soundbytes we gather together the wisdom of Gabe Newell, the self-promotion of Tomonobu Itagaki, and the reforms of education secretary Michael Gove (6). Finally, on p24, we come full circle as comedian Richard Herring (7) tells us what Nintendo handheld gaming brings to his fitness regime.



www.bit.ly/lM3xIa
Up-to-the-minute game news and views



Nintendo is currently making a loss on each 3DS sold, but Iwata said at a recent financial briefing that he expects to begin making a profit on units during 2012

Nintendo 3DS: one year later

What do the first 12 months in the life of a console tell us about the challenges of the modern gaming market?



When 3DS's price was cut just months after release, Nintendo CEO Satoru Iwata issued an apology to early adopters and took a 50 per cent pay cut

How quickly the glistening technology of the future gives way to the ho-hum, untidy present. When 3DS made its first public appearance at E3 in 2010, it sounded like delightful science fiction. The prospect of glasses-free 3D capitalised on the allure of futuristic gadgetry that consumers have historically relied on videogames to provide. Mario could jump out of the screen; Link could nudge aside layers of foliage arrayed with tangible depth to reveal a long-lost temple. How did Nintendo pull it off? By the time people were actually living with the device, however, the question from certain quarters had changed to: why?

"It was kind of fun to work in stereoscopic 3D," says **Alex Neuse** of Gaijin Games, maker of 3DS's *Bit.Trip Saga* collection, "but honestly, it wasn't that different. It was just a different flavour of Nintendo."

Does that Nintendo flavour, or 'difference' – which made its DS the best-selling portable console to date – still have the same level of magnetism today? One year on from its launch, 3DS has come to embody the uncertain future of the videogame business.

Signs of trouble emerged prior to 3DS's release. At the Game Developers Conference in March, just days after 3DS launched in Japan, Nintendo CEO **Satoru Iwata** decried the quantity of cheap software on the App Store. "Quality does not matter to [Apple]," he said. He would go on to insist that retail games and 3DS's still-unopened, unnamed digital games service – soon christened the eShop – would set the system apart. Rather than acknowledge that devices such as Apple's iPhone had changed the face of mobile gaming, Nintendo's leader seemed to be clinging to a myopic view of how games are now being made, released and played.

Quantity was more important than Iwata believed. Five months after that speech, Nintendo had sold just over 700,000 3DS consoles, performing so far below the company's – and, more crucially, shareholders' – expectations that it dropped the handheld's price heavily in all territories to "create momentum". It was a desperate move. Bloomberg Japan reported days after the drop that Nintendo was selling 3DS ➔





STORE FRONT
Even with an extra three months to iron out the kinks following 3DS's release, the eShop has had trouble finding firm footing. Browsing the store is often confusing thanks to odd sectioning, and learning about new titles is a tricky venture. Still, it's a step up from the WiiWare and DSiWare stores. WayForward's Matt Bozon approves. "Having released titles on all three Nintendo digital stores, the eShop is by far my favourite," he explains. "The recent addition of 3D videos has really helped buyers preview the games."

at a loss, an unheard-of manoeuvre for a company that had spent the past ten years happily selling technology such as Wii and DS at premium prices. The obvious need for quality software was even more damning, since 3DS's earning potential now rested solely with games. Thirdparty publishers began to delay and cancel titles for the system, exemplified by Capcom's killing off of *Mega Man Legends 3*. The device that seemed so cutting edge just a year before now seemed to be Nintendo's biggest misstep since its Virtual Boy.

What happened? For starters, 3DS simply wasn't ready for release. Its digital games store, the eShop, didn't open for business until three months after the system was in players' hands. Worse still, developers working on the system didn't have enough time to prepare properly – those making launch games for 3DS weren't even aware that stereoscopic 3D was a feature. **Julian Gollop**, *X-Com* creator and lead designer of Ubisoft Sofia Studio's 3DS launch game *Ghost Recon: Shadow Wars*, recalls just how in the dark designers were. "The biggest shock to us was when Nintendo revealed that the upper screen would have stereoscopic 3D, even though we had been using the devkits for a while already," he says. "We had designed the game with the touchscreen as the main display in order to enable stylus control, and we were using the upper screen for the map and character information. We had to swap the screen functions around and abandon the idea of controlling the game with the stylus."

3DS wasn't ready for release; those making launch games weren't even aware 3D was a feature

Gollop's game was ignored when 3DS first released, but has gained a cult following since for its strengths. It's also been singled out for its use of 3D effects. "We got a lot of compliments from players for our use of 3D. It made the 3DS feel like a window on a diorama with little soldiers moving around. We didn't try to exaggerate the effect just for the sake of it, so it felt comfortable for most users, rather than gimmicky."



The fact that the console's 3D effects – despite the glasses-free convenience – feel like an unsatisfying gimmick in most games is another hurdle that 3DS has yet to fully clear. *Super Mario 3D Land*, the flagship game that Nintendo so badly needed at launch, clearly shows that 3D can facilitate new play — moving the 3D slider to reveal hidden depth in a room full of blocks is clever — but it's a rare exception.

Regardless, developers are now warming to the technology, and that greater understanding is helping the 3D effect become a more useful tool in designers' arsenals. While Gaijin Games wasn't initially impressed by 3DS, that indifference changed as it retrofitted its games for the *Bit.Trip Saga* collection. Gaijin's **Mike Roush** says it just took time: "Our expectations were that we were going to go super bonkers nutzoid with the 3D, but after working with the system we realised that a subtler approach was almost always better, more elegant. We often had to wrangle in our 3D desires."

WayForward is also finding the sweet spot for the 3D screen. "I have a special place in my heart for 2D games. They can be more whimsical than polygonal games, but are rarely as immersive," says **Matt Bozon**, director of *Mighty Switch Force*. "I think the stereoscopic technology that the 3DS brings does an amazing job of drawing the player into a hand-drawn world. Ambient animation and sound can go a long way, but this gives us a new dimension to play with while rendering worlds that can only be described through illustration."

Mighty Switch Force and other downloadable games released at the end of 2011, such as *Pullblox*, have quelled fears that 3DS would see the same piles of shovelware that litter the WiiWare and DSiWare stores. Those games aren't what's selling the system, though. After Christmas, Nintendo announced that sales of 3DS had leapt to more than 15 million units,





Thirdparty support is crucial for 3DS's success. High-profile titles such as *Resident Evil Revelations* (top) and *MGS3D: Snake Eater* are promising signs

just edging out DS's first-year sales of 14.43 million systems. The impressive numbers followed the release of marquee titles, namely Nintendo's own *Super Mario 3D Land* and *Mario Kart 7*, which both sold more than a million copies after being released at the end of 2011. *Monster Hunter Tri G* helped give the system a leg up in Japan when it came out in December, too, but it's undeniable that firstparty titles were, as usual, what convinced people that they needed this new Nintendo hardware.

So Nintendo has proven once again that it makes solid games about Italians jumping and driving cars. The burden remains, however, to prove that the system is fertile ground for game makers intent on reaching a wide audience. As such, the real test for 3DS is yet to come. The next few months will see big-budget titles from major thirdparty franchises hit the system, including *Kingdom Hearts: Dream Drop Distance* and *Metal Gear Solid: Snake Eater 3D* (reviewed p122). The success of those games and others like them, from a business perspective if not a creative one, will determine if third parties have a future on 3DS.

There's more pressure riding on these games, though: 3DS is a proving ground for the sustainability of all



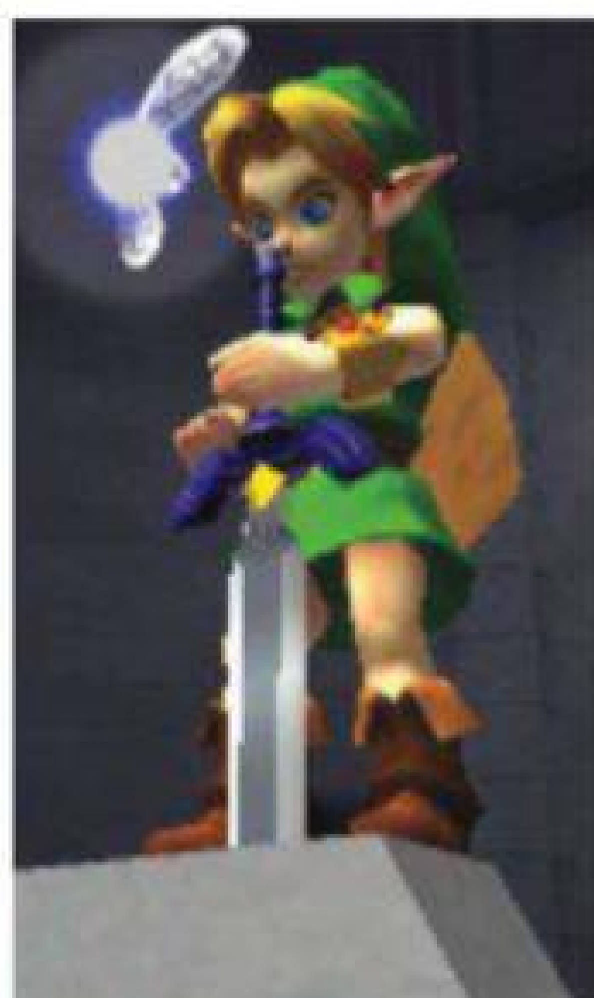
Special bundles bolstered a strong holiday period, pushing 3DS's Japanese sales over 4 million. The arrival of *Monster Hunter 3G* (right) helped, too



devoted portable gaming machines. As the system turns one, Sony is releasing its PlayStation Vita. Unlike 3DS, Vita is coming out with a stable of games backed by strong brands, including *Uncharted: Golden Abyss* and *Wipeout 2048*. 3DS's apparent turnaround has emboldened Sony as well, to the extent that SCEE president **Jim Ryan** said in a recent interview that the company is encouraged by Nintendo. Sony's device is also built to succeed out the gate where Nintendo's failed, particularly in having a strong digital marketplace ready from the get-go.

What Vita doesn't have is a *Mario Kart*. *Uncharted* is a worldwide smash, with the three main PlayStation 3 games selling in excess of 13 million copies, but it's hardly in the league of Nintendo's core franchises; *Mario Kart Wii* has sold over 28 million copies since 2008. 3DS can survive as a profitable console supported by Nintendo's games alone. Developers such as WayForward and Ubisoft's Sofia Studio have shown that there's creative soil to be tilled in developing for 3DS, too, but there's still little proof that they can make a living off of it. In year two, 3DS no longer has to prove it can sustain Nintendo, it has to offer game makers more than just a screen that used to feel like the future. ■







Mario Kart 7 (top), *Ocarina of Time 3D* (left) and *Super Mario 3D Land* (above) have all sold over a million units

BRIGHTER DAYS

The exciting potential for 3DS's sophomore year



While it's still unclear whether or not 3DS will recapture the creative spirit and commercial success that kept DS a happy home for game designers for nearly a decade, there are some games on the horizon that have exciting potential. What will define 3DS in 2012? "Two words: *Animal Crossing*," says Julian Gollop. "The vastly improved connectivity features of 3DS are just so well designed to support this game. I think we should get some more interesting developments all round with games that blur the distinction between online and offline play to create an almost seamless connection between these traditionally separated modes."

TV gaming steps up

With Gaikai functionality to come packed into LG TVs, console-free gaming for the masses is making strides

Tall, assured and evangelical, **David Perry**, founder of cloud gaming service Gaikai, isn't short of an attention-grabbing quotation or two. "I cannot envision a world in which all games are not consumed via cloud storage," he says in his keynote speech at the Cloud Gaming Europe conference during a cold January in London. "Cloud gaming is setting the endgame for consoles as we know them."

Hubris? The ravings of a man who's bet the latter part of his career on the cloud? Speaking just one week after television manufacturer LG announced at CES a deal to include Gaikai in its forthcoming sets, there's a ring of prophetic truth to his words.

"Consoles are going to go away," he tells us after his presentation. "They'll turn into media boxes, which is exactly what Sony and Microsoft have been doing in their marketing for the devices. Soon they won't even be called consoles... When a game console does everything it becomes irrelevant, because its full functionality can be offered by television on a Wi-Fi network. Why would I want a $500 box when I can access all of its content direct through my TV?"

Perry is obsessed with 'friction' – the number of obstacles that prevent a player from playing a game. Friction is what keeps console and PC gaming a niche hobby, he argues. "Apple has reduced friction on phones – before, you had to type your credit card details to buy every mobile game. But Sony has gone the other way in making things more complicated. These days you can pay Best Buy $129 to come to your house to help you set up your PS3 with updates. Likewise, it takes 43 clicks to play a demo of *Lost Planet* for a first-time user on Steam. If you look at the figures on this, the publisher has probably lost 95 per cent of its customers by this point. Gaikai takes two clicks to play *Dragon Age*."



The LG deal potentially combines the power of console and PC gaming with the near-frictionless experience of cloud gaming, all within a TV. CES attendees were wowed with demonstrations of *Super Street Fighter IV: AE* playing on an LG set with no additional hardware attached, the full game streaming from Gaikai's servers. *Street Fighter IV* was an interesting choice for the demo, since its staunchest fans obsess over frame data.

"Consoles are going to go away. They'll turn into media boxes and won't even be called consoles"

"Televisions are not designed to be fast," Perry admits. "The signal comes in and it's moving from board to board internally before it hits the screen with around 70 to 90 milliseconds of delay. At Gaikai, we're constantly battling latency. From my house to a Gaikai server is eight milliseconds. My hotel in London is five milliseconds from a Gaikai server, so we are dealing with these very small numbers in general. It's been my objective to build the fastest network ever. So when you suddenly get 90ms in the TV architecture, that's a big problem.

"But imagine a TV manufacturer totally gets into bed with us and gives us a direct link from our ethernet port straight to the screen. They would have to make modifications to their circuitry but say they plan that for the 2013 TVs – the amount of latency they could save would more than cover the transit time on the Internet. It's going to get to the point where the consumer won't be able to tell if it's going through the Internet or TV. 2013 is my prediction for when we won't be able to distinguish between a streamed and a console version of a game."

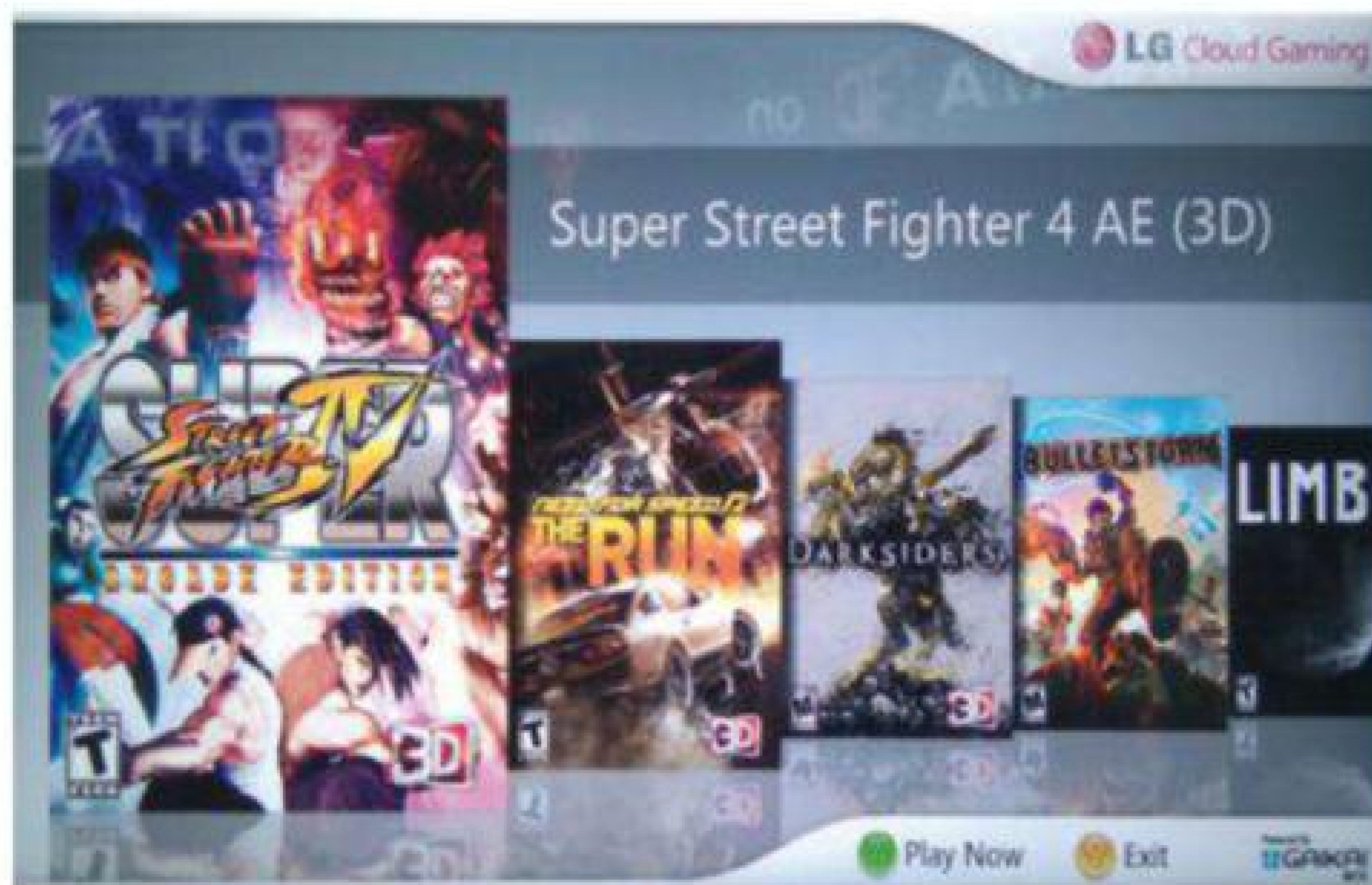
It's an exciting claim, but could it be that Perry is covering Gaikai's back, pushing blame for any latency on to the TV architecture? It also raises the question of whether sets released with Gaikai in 2012 are, to a certain degree, unfit for purpose due to this latency. Either way, it's clear that LG isn't the only TV manufacturer working on these problems. "Every major brand will soon sell televisions with cloud-gaming services in-built," Perry claims. "I haven't spoken to a single major TV brand that isn't in some process of deciding to do this."

Perry believes Apple is planning the announcement of a digital TV, while Microsoft will move into the the TV business. With Sony already manufacturing TVs, does this mean the console wars of old will switch to TV wars? If we want to play a firstparty Sony title, will we have to own a Sony TV? "That paradigm of games being locked to single devices is going to go away, in my opinion," Perry says. "If 50 devices can stream your game, you won't want to sign exclusivity." ■

Gaikai claims that 73 per cent of players it has polled would rather play through the cloud than via downloads



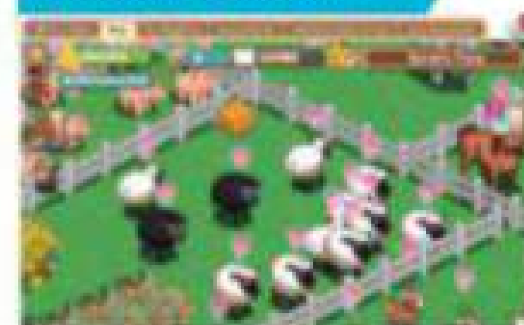
David Perry is founder of cloud gaming service Gaikai. The company is looking to Wi-Fi TV sets as the future for gaming, while competitor OnLive announced during CES that it's partnering with Google TV to provide its gaming services





ACCESS ALL AREAS

The importance of opening up routes to players



If every TV owner has access to the full catalogue of recent game releases without the need for game discs or additional hardware, the pool of players dramatically rises. That's simple mathematics. For evidence of the difference in scale between traditional gaming avenues and new ones, Perry points to Facebook, where player numbers of, say, *FarmVille* (above), swamp those of traditional console and PC games. "If the latest *World Of Warcraft* expansion had been released on Facebook," he says, "it would have debuted at 67th place in the charts based on player figures."

The arcade touch

How Adrenaline Amusements turned mobile apps into coin-op favourites one massive touchscreen at a time

Like the classic coin-op games that drained our collective pockets, many of the best app games today trade in simple skills, repetitive mechanics and brief play sessions that can be (and often are) repeated ad nauseam. Perhaps it's fitting, then, that mobile sensations such as *Fruit Ninja* and *Flight Control* have made the transition from tiny handhelds to arcade units bearing bulging, 46-inch multitouch displays, via Adrenaline Amusements' TouchFX platform.

The Canada-based manufacturer hoped to make a "big iPad" for an arcade environment, says **Marc-Antoine Pinard**, vice president of business development and marketing; something so extravagant it could never be found in an average home and sturdy enough to handle thousands of daily finger swipes. Essentially, it's an upright version of Microsoft's multitouch Surface tablet, albeit outfitted with existing brands that pull in players already attached to the mobile originals.

Nearly 1,000 such screens now populate bars and other social spots in the United States, making TouchFX one of the rare recent coin-op success stories. Adrenaline launched *Fruit Ninja FX* – a translation of Halfbrick's produce-slashing smash – in early 2011, picking the game first due to its ever-increasing mainstream awareness and approachable nature. "We were looking for something where people could touch the screen and right away know what they have to do," explains Pinard. "My two-year-old is playing *Fruit Ninja* on my iPad. He doesn't need an explanation."

Halfbrick spent weeks working with Adrenaline to refine the experience for the larger display, as porting the portable app meant reworking assets and rebalancing the game due to the longer finger swipes needed to decimate digital apples and bananas. "The fruit are actually now pretty close to actual size," notes **Phil Larsen**, the studio's chief marketing officer. "It gives you an even better sense of satisfaction by slicing with such broad strokes."

Pinard believes the best arcade experiences deliver "360-degree immersion," and between the large display, booming speakers and active movement needed to interact with the touchscreen, he says TouchFX is "something where all of your body is embedded in a multimedia experience". By building these larger and arguably more enthralling versions of popular mobile games, Adrenaline hoped to recapture the sensation of being sucked into an arcade racing game some years back via glossy screens and force-feedback chairs, despite owning and playing that same title on a home console. It's a gamble to expect fans to spend as much on a single arcade play as they might on the full mobile app, however – but it's one that appears to be paying off thus far.

> "TouchFX is something where all of your body is embedded in a multimedia experience"

The two TouchFX offerings that followed *Fruit Ninja* similarly expanded upon established franchises, but aimed for notably distinct demographics. *Flight Control FX* brings Firemint's finger-based aeroplane-directing affair to public spaces, and Pinard says it's been successful in capturing the imaginations of oft-alienated bystanders: "For the first time, we are seeing moms playing an arcade game instead of sitting at a table and watching a kid play."





Marc-Antoine Pinard (top) is Adrenaline Entertainments' vice president of business development and marketing; Phil Larsen is the company's chief marketing officer

Infinity Blade FX, on the other hand, makes a strong play for the hardcore set, thanks to its medieval hack-and-slash duels and multiplayer battles available on multiscreen TouchFX units. Still, Chair Entertainment's celebrated adventure was a surprise pick for an arcade release, considering the length of the original quest and the strong sense of personal progression held within. The arcade iteration distills that approach down to a rapid succession of battles – like a traditional coin-op fighter – in which a fallen round means pumping in cash to continue the trek to topple the familiar God-King from the iOS titles. Adrenaline's research says *Infinity Blade FX* is primarily attracting Android phone owners, who've thus far been denied their own mobile version of the showcase swordfighter.

Expanding TouchFX's global presence is now a key goal for the company, with 34 countries outside the US set to receive units manufactured locally in each region. Additional titles are planned – Pinard hopes to pursue an adaptation of *Infinity Blade II* down the line – but multitouch displays won't be the company's only focus: Adrenaline plans to bring two new hardware experiences to arcades, which he ambiguously hints are "aligned with technologies seen at the [2012 Consumer Electronics Show]".

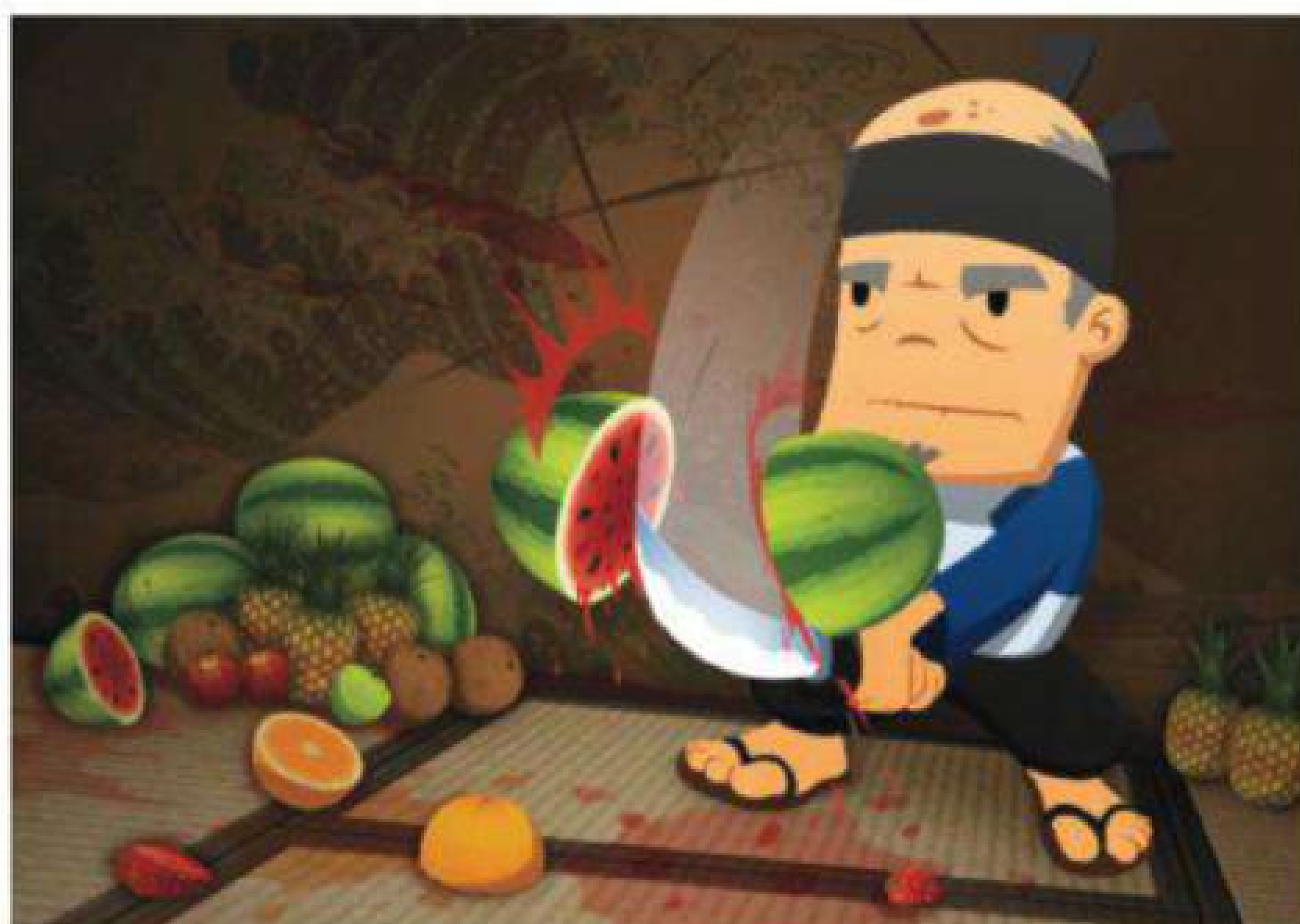
And what about creating original titles as opposed to porting mobile favourites? Don't count on it any time soon. "There are way too many brands," claims Pinard. "I would rather work with what people like right now." ■

TOUCHING BASE
Adrenaline's first three TouchFX cabinets span a diverse array of popular mobile titles, with more in the works. 1 *Infinity Blade FX*, the gorgeous hack-and-slash dueller, serves up the series' swordfights while minimising the between-battle activity present in the iOS hit. 2 *Flight Control FX* still requires players to land aircraft by tracing their paths to a runway, but benefits from the greater breathing space of the arcade. 3 Multiplatform smash *Fruit Ninja* launched on TouchFX well before its similarly enlarged Kinect counterpart shipped last year.









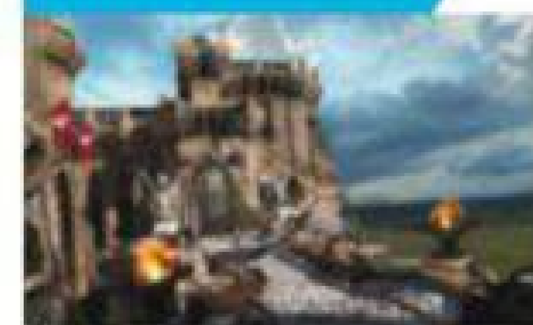






All three of Adrenaline's TouchFX cabinets house the same 46-inch multitouch display and hardware, but each is uniquely skinned in order to stand out in a crowded public venue and attract players' money

INFINITE APPEAL
Retooling *Infinity Blade* for the arcade crowd



Infinity Blade was never a slouch in iOS form, but for its arcade debut, Chair Entertainment implemented a few touch-ups for the gargantuan displays. "We're able to really crank up the textures, shadows and post-processing effects to make it look even more amazing," says **Donald Mustard**, creative director at the Epic Games subsidiary. *Infinity Blade FX* offers another new element: physical redemption tickets that can be exchanged for trinkets and prizes at amusement centres. "It's so awesome to be wailing on the enemy and notice a bunch of tickets streaming out of the arcade machine as you do it," Mustard adds. Already available in North America, the game will be in arcade and amusement parks worldwide soon.



Introducing the Edge Create Challenge 2012

Win a Unity Pro account and an expenses-paid trip to the Unite conference in our browser game contest

We've teamed up with the company behind game engine Unity to launch a game creation competition. From March 6, we'll be inviting entries based on a to-be-revealed theme and built with Unity for Web browsers.

The winner and two runners-up will be awarded Unity Pro licences and both the Android Pro and iOS Pro add-ons, each set being worth $4,500 in total. The winner will also net a trophy and a trip to Unite, Unity's developer conference in Amsterdam in August, including airfare, hotel room and an entrance pass for one person. Entries may also be featured in the pages of **Edge** and on our Web site, as well as in other Future publications and via Unity's Web site and networks.

The free version of Unity gives you all you need to build your entry. It's a powerful, extensive toolset for 2D and 3D games, and you'll also be able to make use of Unity's Asset Store, a resource of free and paid-for assets that include art, shaders, sounds and tutorials. Download Unity at www.unity3d.com/unity.

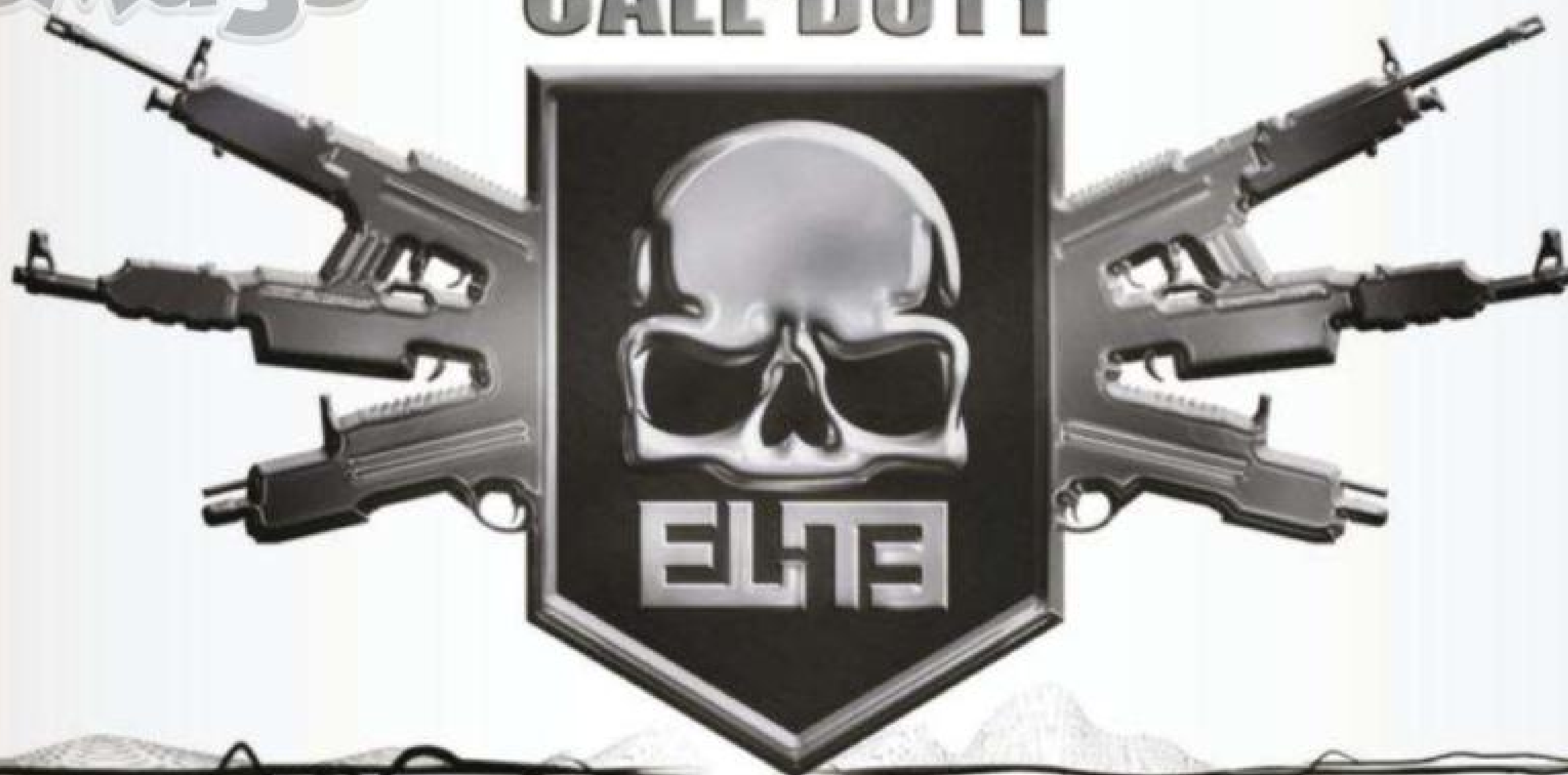


www.bit.ly/AgDQdv
Full competition details, plus terms and conditions

The **Edge** Create Challenge 2012 will kick off during the San Francisco GDC on March 6, when we'll reveal the theme and the judging panel, which will consist of various leading figures in game development (including Unity's founders) and **Edge** staff. The panel will be looking for a creative interpretation of the theme, originality and technical merit. The closing date is six weeks later: April 17.

Visit www.edge-online.com/unity-competition for more news, further details and full terms and conditions. ■

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XBOX 360

Jump in.

RECORD COLLECTORS

Celebrating game enthusiasts who've taken things to extremes

To mark the release of Guinness World Records 2012 Gamer's Edition, we decided to pluck out a handful of the more eyebrow-raising entries to share. You are fully entitled to your incredulity, of course.

Most international *Street Fighter* competition wins goes to UK gamer Ryan Hart, who has won over 450 *Street Fighter* events in 13 different countries from 1998 to 2011. Then there's most expensive virtual property, which SEE Digital Studios secured after paying $6 million (£3,860,000) for Planet Calypso, a virtual planet within the online game *Entropia Universe*.

The largest collection of Mario memorabilia belongs to Japanese 25-year-old Mitsugu Kikai (pictured), with over 5,400 unique Mario items in his horde, which he began as a child. Finally, the longest videogame marathon nod goes to Belgian gamers Tony Desmet, Jesse Rebmann and Jeffrey Gammon after they managed to play *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* for 109 hours straight at the GUNKtv World Record Gaming Event in Antwerp. ■

Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"Some people think they can get away with something and just hope that people won't see through the bullshit. **The Internet is way smarter than any of us."**

Gabe Newell's one piece of advice for game developers hits the spot

"Myself – in a variety of senses."



When asked who he paid most attention to in 2011, Valhalla's **Tomonobu Itagaki** doesn't shy away from a pat on his own back



"*Shenmue*'s licence is an IP that belongs to Sega. **We can obtain the licence from Sega."**

The death of *Shenmue*'s social outing on mobiles doesn't necessarily spell the end for the series, affirms **Yu Suzuki**



"Technology in schools will no longer be micromanaged by Whitehall. We're giving schools and teachers freedom over what and how to teach, revolutionising ICT as we know it."

UK education secretary **Michael Gove** opens the door for a new wave of game makers

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game Storm Racer
Manufacturer WAHLAP Technology

In the heyday of the arcade scene (remember the neon haze and the unrivalled opportunities for second-hand smoking?), Japan-based manufacturers and developers ruled the roost with AAA arcade games and cabinets. As this column has attested in recent months – with iOS ports (**E**236) and East Asian titles such as *Power Truck* (**E**237) – the landscape is changing and the power is shifting. Other territories are beginning to produce games that imitate and aim to improve upon traditional genres.

Consider *Storm Racer*, the second part of China-based distributor WAHLAP's one-two punch, which began with last month's *Power Truck*. The game is another straight-up shot of arcade racing adrenaline, which has been adapted by indie developer Insoft from a PC title and invigorated with a crisp 720p display running 60-frames-per-second visuals.

Gameplay requires *Ridge Racer*-style drifting to build up boost, while stages are gorgeous, with sweeping vistas that evoke Sega's *Daytona USA*. The sense of speed and camera placement, meanwhile, conjures fond memories of the seminal *OutRun 2*, demonstrating that these new arcade contenders aren't just cloning classics, they're striving to recapture old magic.

The ability to network up to eight cabinets – to *Power Truck*'s four and matching that of marketplace competitor *Dirty Drivin'* (**E**235) – suggests that WAHLAP is both improving its technical capabilities and addressing a gap in the market for mass-multiplayer experiences.





PlayStation Network

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My favourite game
Richard Herring

Talking quick-fix play and long-term addiction with that rarest of breeds: a comedian who's won a GamesMaster Golden Joystick

Once one half of Lee & Herring, the comedy partnership behind TV shows such as Fist Of Fun (recently released on DVD), **Richard Herring** has spent the past decade writing and performing solo stand-up shows while also appearing on the TV panel-show circuit and launching hit podcasts such as As It Occurs To Me. In between, he maintains a gaming habit that began in the wilds of Cheddar in the early '80s.

What's the first videogame system you remember using?

My sister bought something that connected to the TV, which played tennis and maybe two other games, but the first thing I could play on properly was an Acorn Electron computer. My parents bought it thinking I would learn to program computers, but most of the time I just played Kevin Toms' *Football Manager*, which is one of my favourite games ever. I also liked things like *Defender*. I remember playing various adventure games, but they were very difficult because you would have to get the wording exactly right or the game wouldn't go on to the next section.

This was the early '80s: did you feel like there was a kind of revolution happening, or did it feel like just another distraction?

It was really exciting. I remember when I played *Space Invaders* with my friend Phil Fry at the Cliff Hotel in Cheddar Gorge, sneaking away after school with a pile of ten pence pieces without my mum and dad knowing, and thinking that was incredible. I liked pinball as much as videogames, really. I really loved any gadgets and games, and the idea of being able to play these things at home seemed revolutionary back then.

THE NERD'S NERD
"With some comedians, you look out into the audience and there'll be lots of cool young hipsters," Herring observes, "but you come to my gigs and you look out and there's lots of bearded men – computer geeks in Battlestar Galactica or Lee & Herring T-shirts." His popularity with this "nerd army", he says, could be partly down to his Internet activity: his first Web site launched way back in 1995. "I guess a lot of my stand-up in the past has been about being a single man who likes playing computer games and being boring," he laughs. "You attract what you see in the mirror."



Do you remember winning the GamesMaster Golden Joystick?

I do – it's pretty much the only thing I've ever won in my life. [Laughs.] The challenge was to make a film using very primitive editing software. It's on YouTube now, if you really want to watch it.

Going on games you've talked about in the past, you seem drawn to quick-fix things, such as *Mario Kart* and *Rock Band*.

I got *Guitar Hero* and *The Beatles: Rock Band* and I've only played them about three times. It's such an outlay, and then you've got to have it all set up and it's got to all work, and if anything goes wrong… Also, with something like that, it's only really fun if other people can play it with you. That's why I've tended to go for games like *Civilization II* in the past. It really ate up a lot of my time, playing it on my own.

"Mario Kart is actually good in the gym because you start to cycle harder when you're losing"

What was it that really grabbed you?

It was one of those things where you'd go, "Oh, I'll just play until the end of the next turn," and then eight hours later you'd still be playing, because there was always something going on – it was cerebral enough to keep you thinking about stuff. Then you'd just want to make sure your caravan got somewhere, or the war progressed in a certain way. I just liked all the different ways that the game could go – you'd play it and it'd be different every time.

Which games have been distracting you in recent months?

I've been playing a lot of *Monopoly* on my iPhone, but on holiday I started playing *Mario Kart* again on my DS, which I haven't played for ages. I'm trying to get the point where I go to the gym and sit on an exercise bike, and that's where I play these games. *Mario Kart* is actually good [for that] because you start to cycle harder when you're losing. You think you're controlling it. [Laughs.] You can sit on an exercise bike and play *Monopoly* or *Mario Kart* for 45 minutes and forget you're exercising. I'm trying to find games that will keep me going in that way. *Yahtzee* is a perennial favourite – I've played thousands of games of *Yahtzee*. There is a way of getting better at that game – it's quite mindless, but there's a logic to it.

What's your favourite game of all time?

It's a tricky one – a toss-up, really, between *Football Manager* by Kevin Toms and *Civilization* by Sid Meier. I've tried various incarnations of *Civilization* and I think I just really understood the second one. Purely in terms of the number of hours I've played it, *Scrabble* might beat it, but I think *Civilization II* is my favourite game of all time. ■



www.bit.ly/zVmetx
More gaming talk
with Richard Herring

Herring's stand-up show What Is Love Anyway? is touring across the UK until May. Visit his Web site at www.richardherring.com for tour dates, links to his podcast work, and his diary, containing nearly ten years' worth of daily entries

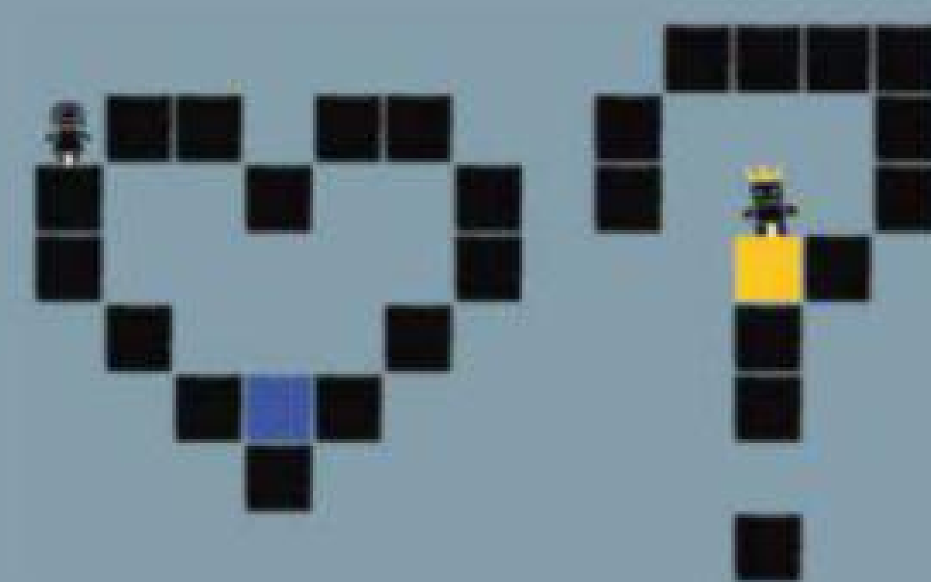
WEB SITE
Love letter From Canada
www.bit.ly/x0kkZn
Keita '*Katamari Damacy*' Takahashi left Namco last year to move away from the game industry. But just when he thought he was out, it appears it – or at least developer Tiny Speck – pulled him back in. Currently based at the company's Canada studio, where he's hard at work on under-wraps MMOG *Glitch*, Takahashi is writing a blog that's a light-hearted, insightful charting of both a developer's work experience and a foreigner's view of a strange new land. It's an invaluable look through the lens of an eastern game auteur as he navigates the western industry and its quirks. Takahashi's also a keen photographer, snapping his way through life – including tours of other studios – and then mixing in a colourful avatar that would make the King Of All Cosmos proud.





VIDEO
Battlestar Galactica RPG
www.bit.ly/yootfX
Live-action adaptations of popular game franchises have made a bad habit of botching (or, worse, abandoning) the core pillars of their source material. CollegeHumour's 16bit-style RPG adaptation of the recent Battlestar Galactica remake is a great inversion of that trend. It's a parody that employs all of the main plot milestones of Ronald D Moore's uneven TV show, and its creators are keenly aware of RPG traditions, using everything from item selection to turn-based battles to tell the tale of the ill-fated Galactica's voyage home.

WEB GAME
Midas
www.bit.ly/whBL94
Wanderlands' entry for the Ludum Dare Jam 72-hour competition is a masterclass in tight, simple platform-puzzling and minimalist aesthetics. You play Midas, whose infamous touch turns platform blocks to gold, causing them to stack or drop into oblivion, depending on how the level lies. You have two objectives: touch water to allow Midas to make human contact, and then reach your beau. It's trickier than it sounds and the short levels are punctuated with narrative nuggets, giving players a thread to hang on to as they leap around each stage. Remove the wrong blocks on your journey to water and you may well destroy your chances of reaching your lady soon after. The look, feel and rhythm is closest, perhaps, to Sony's *Echochrome* – high praise for a game made under serious time constraints.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

A gallimaufry of things that tugged at our attention during the production of **E**238

BOOK
Distrust That Particular Flavor, William Gibson
Known primarily for genre-defining cyberpunk novel Neuromancer, William Gibson has a reputation as one of the most forward-thinking authors of his generation (he did, after all, foresee the Internet). While the quality of his fiction is no secret, it may come as a surprise to find Gibson has slowly but surely amassed a solid portfolio of journalistic work, which is collected for the first time here. From glimpses of a brush with Hollywood (highlighting one of the few joys of Johnny Mnemonic, Takeshi Kitano) to an encounter with Akira creator Katsuhiro Otomo, Distrust That Particular Flavor takes in a wide spectrum of milestones in the writer's life.



continue

Vita's second stick
How can such a nubby little thing deliver so much satisfaction?

Snakeskin 3DS
A Nintendo handheld that looks like it has bite

Zelda's timeline
Finally, our chance to link the series together

Disturbing mods
Hold on, *My Little Skyrim Pony* was just a bad dream, right? Phew

quit

Vita and PS3
Living happily together, but transferring data takes time and patience

Sony's The Tester
Back for a third series. Really. A *third* series

Zelda's timeline
Mmm. Less definitive than you might expect

Fake ban emails
We really wanted *The Old Republic*'s 'special dance zones' to be real

TWEETS

I really wish these piracy bills didn't have names so similar to tasty mexican dishes. Keep reminding myself; SOPA bad, SOPE delicious
@chuck_russom
Chuck Russom, sound designer/recordist

Received this mail today: Your game was so beautiful that it made me cry--literally--and kept me off heroin for a month. you are heroes!
@DavidAnfossi
David Anfossi, executive producer at Eidos Montreal

LOTS of requests to keep the unusual "rotating eyebrows" bug in. Could it be that I have stumbled onto the Holy Grail of game design?
@danthat
Dan Marshall, indie developer

Idea: Shenmue Clicker
@ibogost
Ian Bogost, professor at Georgia Tech



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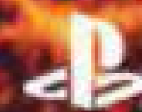




PC DVD
XBOX 360
PS3
MASS EFFECT 3


15




PS3




PC DVD


EA


N7

DISPATCHES MARCH

Within Dispatches this issue, Dialogue sees **Edge** readers tired of over-exposure to gaming mascots, unwilling to put up with *Skyward Sword*'s lineage of flaws, and irked at sales of adult games to minors, but overjoyed at finally getting hands-on with Vita. In Perspective, **Steven Poole** questions the ethics of simulating torture in a videogame setting, **Leigh Alexander** asks why gamers are so passionate about their media, and **Brian Howe** has managed to lay his hands on a script outline for the latest deceptively highbrow action game trailer.



www.bit.ly/yGqQ0f
Discuss gaming topics with fellow **Edge** readers



Dialogue



Send your views to edge@futurenet.com, using 'Dialogue' as the subject. Our letter of the month wins a 3DS

Know your roots

Brian Howe's column on the rise and fall of Sonic-alike Swifty The Marmoset raises an issue I feel is particularly relevant to another overworked franchise: *Resident Evil*. The plight of Swifty, to be overused and over-exposed by the game industry's brand-obsessed goons, also applies to *Revelations'* two leads: Chris Redfield and Jill Valentine.

It was Chris and Jill's seeming innocence, their lack of battle scars, that for me contrasted so boldly and brilliantly with the skin-eating monsters in the original *Resident Evil*. Ever since the tension and turmoil of the first game, I can't help but feel the series lost its way (yes, even with the much-revered *Resident Evil 2* – the first hint that Capcom had more of an inclination towards action and explosions than survival horror).

Perhaps it's as much to do with the changes to gameplay the series has seen since *Resident Evil 4*, wonderful as that game is. In its fixed-camera debut, guns and ammo were like gold dust: taking aim was a shaky, scary trial that could see your progress halted in a few seconds. It may have been about zombies, but *Resident Evil*, in its puzzles, item-management and pace, was grounded in a sort of realism. And that's why my heart sinks at the footage of *Resident Evil 6*. Not only do I not get a sense of believable threat from the announcement trailer, I don't get a sense of realism either. It looks as far from the silent, shock-filled corridors of the series' origin as can be, and ever since the developer has moved into action-adventure games, the results have underwhelmed.
Brian James

While *Resident Evil 6* looks a far cry from the series' roots, there's an argument to be made that it perfected that formula with its 1996 debut. When you make such a defining game, just where do you go next?

Caught up in its own legend?

Having spent the past two months playing *Skyward Sword* at the rate a 55-year-old with chronic anaemia might be expected to, I can't understand how the entirely justified praise for the finer parts of this game has not been tempered with discussion of its weaknesses. I know Nintendo doesn't fix what ain't broke, but what ain't broke can still age, like a VCR in a PVR world. The problem isn't SD resolution (gameplay matters more and 480p upscales surprisingly well anyway), but that the rest of the game engine is locked in 1998.

There's no level streaming, just fade-and-wait to move between areas, or enter/leave a building. The system still loses track of areas between visits, what does/doesn't regenerate or get reused is what's easiest to code or saves most space, not what makes sense. So while I can live without voice acting, bizarrely you can only speed up text, not skip it, but can skip repeat cutscenes, even when reloaded from a save made before you first saw them. Pickup 'stings' for some items are shown the first time in a session, even mid-combat, regardless of how often you've seen them before. For others, it's every time, and it's not configurable. And so on down to the minutiae, such as interface elements that can't handle arbitrary quantities.

It would take a 'fanboi' with a hand-sewn Miyamoto plushie to argue that any of this is critical to the feel, or that the workarounds it creates are part of the experience. The best that can be said is that time not spent on updating such elements may have been used to create the superior gameplay. The worst is to air a suspicion that the game structure is so antiquated and modular that no one *dares* update it, because they don't know how.

There is always a point in the product cycle where a 'not broken, don't fix it' approach becomes strategically broken. It was clearly a mistake not to at least HDMI-enable the Wii when the competition caught up on motion control. *Skyward Sword* repeats the error in software, ignoring advances in open-world and persistent object engines, inventory management, and interface design. Gameplay may be king, but other pieces must be developed to survive in a chess game, and at Nintendo some of those are starting to look glued to their squares.
Dave Lockwood

Points well made. Part of Nintendo's charm is that its titles feel wholly its own, though, and *Skyward Sword* could have it worse than sharing issues with a 1998 game that's still just about perfect. To refresh yourself on that legacy, try the 3DS that's on its way.

Fighting the good fight

I have to disagree with your assessment, in the *Skullgirls* preview in **E**237, of beat 'em ups as 'frustrating'. It's encouraging to see, at a time when cynics are ever-prophesying the death of traditional genres, that one of gaming's oldest still has a presence in **Edge**, and indeed the industry at large. *Street Fighter IV*, of course, is largely to thank, but so are a raft of developers, both indie (as with *Skullgirls* developer Reverge Labs) and established. To see *Soul Calibur V* getting a great score on home consoles, alongside the release of a solid iOS port of the original, shows me that the beat 'em up is one genre that hasn't got ahead of itself chasing ridiculous or unnecessary innovation. The formula is tweaked from time to time, but the core components remain familiar enough to be inviting time and again.

A good case in point is your Post Script on *Soul Calibur V*. Basically, when beat 'em ups do try to outreach their grasp, such as emulating other genres' storytelling, they fall flat on their face. My point, I suppose, is that while other genres chase a golden goose, adding layer upon layer of polish

and mechanics for users to juggle, the simplest approach is often the best. Beat 'em ups have barely changed since the early-'90s, when we learned the wafer-thin narrative of *Street Fighter* and decided it was enough to keep waggling fightsticks for the next 20 years, and more power to them.
Phil McDowdy

We'll drink to that. It's odd (and refreshing), in a time of ever-growing storytelling ambition among developers, to be able to honour a genre for its narrative shallowness.

Age gate or revolving door?

I've just watched the 'Hero' television advert for Gamestation. A middle-aged woman walks up to the brave, helpful staff behind the counter and asks for *Saints Row* for her nephew. There follows a close-up shot of the counter with a copy of *Saints Row: The Third* being passed to her. In clear view on the case is a big red circle with '18' written in the middle. Now, I'm well aware of modern-day families and relations being of all ages, but surely you can understand my point. The ad is clearly aimed at parents/aunties/uncles/ whoever who aren't confident enough to go into a shop and purchase the correct game for the lucky recipient. There's nothing wrong with that – helpful and informative staff are a very good thing. However, upon watching the ad you must agree that the age of the woman is such that her nephew stands a fairly good chance of being younger than 18.

It seems wholly irresponsible of a nationwide chain to advertise in this way. I'm not just targeting Gamestation, either. Upon release day, I visited my local Sainsbury's to pick up my preorder copy of *Modern Warfare 3*, only to be asked by the lady behind the counter: "Is this another violent one?"

"Yes, very," I replied.

"My son plays these *Call Of Duty* ones. He's only eight. That's bad, isn't it?!"

"Yes it is, they have very bad language, bloody violence and torture."

"Oh, but he says there aren't any good games that aren't 18s."

"There are a lot of very good games that are suitable for all ages."

I eventually gave up due to her lack of interest and while walking out passed another lady with her son, who was no more than 12, picking up a copy of *MW3* and telling his mum that it's the one he wants.

Now, I have ten years' experience of working in supermarkets at various levels at various companies. We regularly had mystery shopper visits from Trading Standards who used 18-year-olds that looked a lot younger to try to buy alcohol. We used to dread these visits, since they can lead to fines and job losses. As staff, you also had to politely refuse sale of *any* age-restricted goods if you believed they were being purchased by an adult with intent to give to a minor.

There needs to be tighter control on stores selling games – by Trading Standards and their own management. Perhaps this will aid our beloved industry in being recognised as a more adult-orientated one, rather than 'just for kids', as it is still seen by many.
Andy Masterson

This is an issue that took the spotlight last year. While a large portion of responsibility can be laid at the feet of retailers for controlling sales, at least as much responsibility surely rests with parents to get educated and know the content of the media they buy.

Near is working much better than StreetPass on 3DS in a crowded city like Hong Kong

Living with Vita

I have just got my PS Vita and it is fantastic. Near is working much better than StreetPass on 3DS in a crowded city like Hong Kong. I bump into lots more Vita players and receive many in-game gifts, even for games I have not yet bought. This is a brilliant way to entice me to buy more games. It also helps that on the PlayStation Store the download versions of retail games are slightly cheaper than buying the game card. I hope you guys can start giving out a Vita for your letter of the month soon.
James Woo

How developers choose to exploit Vita's connectivity in the coming months will be fascinating – the inevitable arrival of a new *Monster Hunter* will no doubt deliver some of the goods. In the meantime, for our full appraisal of Sony's console, see p76. ■

Does good gameplay absolve *Skyward Sword* of its hand-me-down flaws? Not according to Dave Lockwood



ONLINE OFFLINE

Your responses to topics on our Web site at www.edge-online.com

Nimblebit says Zynga cloned *Tiny Tower* in its new mobile game, *Dream Heights*. Zynga CEO Mark Pincus says Nimblebit can't complain since the genre has been around for years. Does he have a point? (www.bit.ly/yGqQ0f)

It's fascinating that I'm not allowed to make a copy of a game, but if I were to MAKE a copy of a game, that's legally acceptable. If that's the way our legal systems work, I really need to become a lawyer and quit working for a living (no offence, scrupulous lawyers), or sell my sweded movies to rival studios.
NewBond, Edge forum

Scary reading. In a culture where iteration is prized over innovation it is sadly understandable however.
Regmcfly, Edge forum

It's not about the artwork or the graphics. Zynga has copied their gameplay mechanics down to the smallest part. That's not taking inspiration from another game; it's blatant rip-off!
Truls Hå, via Facebook

Aren't they both inspired by *SimTower*? When *The Legend Of Zynga: The Farmville Hourglass* appears there might be more to be concerned about.
Stewart Nolan, via Facebook

You fool, Nolan. Everyone knows they have work experience hacks trawling Facebook for ideas!
Giuseppe Giovanni Morris, via Facebook



marshdavies.com



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Is it OK to simulate torture as long as it tops up our revulsion of it? If so, where do we draw the line?

You pick a shard of glass out of the broken window and stab the guy in the mouth with it. He doesn't tell you what you want to know, so you start punching him in the head. He spits blood, and then spills the beans. Now you can go happily on your way, probing the unlocked new playspace with your permanently tumescent rifle.

What's obscene about this moment in *Call Of Duty: Black Ops* isn't so much the lovingly simulated blood and violence, but the implication of its embedded national security ideology: that torture is an effective way to elicit mission-critical information. In most videogames, a quick scene of torture porn is just functionally equivalent to pulling a lever. And this might even lead to you an argument that such scenes in games aren't too graphic, but on the contrary, they aren't graphic – or prolonged – enough.

Ian Bogost's superb recent collection of essays, How To Do Things With Videogames, makes just this argument. In Disinterest, he argues that ragdoll Web game *Torture Game 2* is offensive precisely because of its "lack of earnestness and depth of simulation", and praises the Wii version of *Manhunt 2* because its gestural controls generate a "physiological response" as well as the psychological disgust the player feels for what they're doing. His conclusion is a bracing one. "A murder simulator ought to revile us, the more the better," Bogost insists. "We should simulate torture not to take the place of real acts but to renew our disgust for them."

The normative value of Bogost's 'should' is interestingly shocking (he appears to be recommending the production of more torture simulators), but I am suspicious of his reasons. Does our disgust for acts of torture really need constant renewal? Would it otherwise be dulled? Don't the grubby thrills of, say, the torture porn movie genre (Saw, Hostel, and so on) actually depend on our disgust being inexhaustible, even as it can coexist with guilty pleasure when we know it isn't really happening? I recently watched The Human Centipede 2, a grimly, brilliantly perverse sequel that plays with the idea of someone tempted to act out fantasies suggested by a media product. The sequences with the teeth and the knees are so revolting that I'm completely sure I wouldn't need to play an interactive version just to top up my disapproval.

> Everyone knows torture is bad, too – it's just that some people think you should do it anyway

Another implication of Bogost's argument is that if the deep simulation of torture is justified by our moral edification, then we would be all the more morally edified by playing simulations of other acts we find repellent – just to be sure we keep finding them revolting, to "renew our disgust". Bogost is arguably constrained by his own reasoning to also approve of a rape simulator, such as the 2006 Japanese game *RapeLay*, which has the player grope women on a subway train and rape a mother and her two teenage daughters. In fact, Bogost writes about such eroge and its forebears in another essay, Titillation, but he does not call for the production of more such games. Perhaps his assumption is that everyone knows rape is bad, so no one needs to play a rape simulator to be reminded of it.

Yet everyone already knows that torture is bad, too – it's just that some people think you should do it anyway. This has also been an obscenity in our culture since the days of Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld's grubby lexicon of euphemisms: the 'abuse', or 'stress', or 'expert' application of 'tough interrogation' to prisoners. Appeals to a 24-style 'ticking bomb' scenario became the rhetorical comfort blanket of a particular kind of macho commentator. But to force those people to play torture simulators in the hope of changing their minds would be to misunderstand what passes for their argument in the first place. Even the academics and columnists who insist on the necessity of torture don't claim that it's a pleasant business. Indeed, their pose as hard-headed realists – able to face up to perilous facts and tough decisions – depends in part on a continued acknowledgment that torture is horrific in itself.

We should feel equally uneasy, though, about any automatic moral equation between simulation and reality. Such a confusion is at the heart of Britain's laws on 'extreme' pornography, which bans not only photographic images of people performing acts of, say, BDSM or bestiality, but even computer-generated images of such acts, the production of which has involved no people or animals at all. Our simulations are so much less powerful than the kind of 'ancestor simulation' an advanced civilisation might run (in which the philosopher Nick Bostrom says we could all actually be living) that the characters in them do not count as living and cannot suffer. But the people playing them, whether or not we turn out to be simulated ourselves, can suffer, in that we might feel degraded by the experience. If developers ought to make more torture simulators for the reasons Bogost offers, then it seems to follow that they should also make simulators of all the other horrors we can imagine humans inflicting on one another; but I'm not sure that anyone needs to, or should, play them.

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life Of Videogames. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net

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LEIGH ALEXANDER

Level Head

In the Internet age, what is the gaming media's value, and why are fans so passionate about it?

These days, most readers seem to rely on the games press as a source of news, information, and the all-important review. Without us, how will anyone know what's going on in the gaming world and which of its products are good? Obvious, right?

Well, not so much. When it comes to news, the kinds of information often reported by the games press don't, on the face of it, have much use for gamers – what do sales trends, predictable release announcements (a game with a '2' in its title will be followed by one with a '3'? Stop the press!) and screenshots of games everyone will get to play in a couple of months really tell anyone about the industry?

Reviews are almost worse. Maybe 15 to 20 years ago games were primitive enough that you could compartmentalise and evaluate them with a degree of supposed objectivity, but modern videogames are such complex, and ultimately subjective, value-dependent experiences that even the idea of a review is imperfect. Judging by reactions to popular game reviews, audiences seem slow to adapt to the idea of educated opinion vs definitive qualitative statement, too.

This is especially true given the democratic Internet climate. One wonders what value users feel they derive from those who purport to be authorities when they can share views; aggregate opinions and sentiment; and gather almost all their own information on forums, social media networks, and community blogs.

However, although I might have a skewed view from my position, it still seems to me that game consumers are more passionate about their press than other fields. I know plenty of film fans and literature buffs, yet none of them could recount the daily doings of their favourite movie writers and book reviewers. However, gamers are aware of – if not passionate about – the individual voice, preferences and career trajectories of the writers they like on their preferred sites. Game journalists also often have more Twitter followers than more objectively relevant public figures.

> The value of the gaming press isn't its authority, but in providing gathering places for culture

When the game journalism landscape shifts – someone gets a new job, say, or one Web site closes and another one opens – you'd think fans would consider it mundane minutiae. But some recent changes in the US games media (the promotion of Stephen Totilo to Kotaku editor-in-chief, the founding of Vox Games) brought about a flurry of discussion – enough to highlight just how much gamers value their press, albeit in an abstract yet fervent fashion that's tough to quantify.

To some degree, this is because game journalists are aspirational figures to many young gamers. The most passionate niche of the traditional gaming community values competition and mastery. To many, being a game journalist is probably analogous to being at the top of a leaderboard, in that both positions are assumed to prove some degree of supreme knowledge and skill.

There's also the popular conception that game journalists 'get paid to play games all day', occupying some mythical career space that involves a glorious daily soak in this hobby, punctuated by free videogames and paid trips to consumer conference meccas. Of course, it isn't really like that. Even if it were, it'd be like having to eat nothing but chocolate cake with milkshake all three meals a day for three years, or something – you know, the kind of thing you'd only fantasise about until you actually had to do it.

But even this fantasy is secondary when it comes to why gamers follow their games press in such a charged, love-hate fashion. What's clear is that the primary role game journalists play is to act as lightning rods for fans. The only thing gamers love more than games is talking about them, including making guesses, analysing, arguing and one-upmanship, and sorting facts into order. Thus the foremost value of the gaming press isn't its authority or ability to deliver facts, but its role as governor, and in providing gathering places for culture.

Never is this more clear than at year-end. As a gamer, I find the annual litany of top fives, top tens, best this and so on inspiring and alleviating. Even though I'm part of the process and write a few myself, these roundups give me a sense of closure and participation. Our industry evolves so fast, and we're so inundated with content, with experience and with information. When I can read several sites' lists and seek consensus – or, failing that, seek a better understanding of what sorts of people like which sorts of games – it helps me know where my own feelings fall.

The games audience is a unique bunch of consumers. I'd wager they care more about their press than, say, film buffs seem to because they are more entrenched and more vocal about their hobby than other kinds of hobbyists. Maybe it's because gamers still carry the mantle of outsider status; maybe it's because interactivity and fantasy escapism enhances the sense of us belonging to a world that not just everyone can enter. Most likely, it's because criticism, dialogue and character are absolutely essential to the culture of new media. Helping us moderate and process all of that emotion is probably the consumer games press's most important job.

Leigh Alexander is a widely published writer on the business, design and culture of videogames and social media



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BRIAN HOWE

You're playing it wrong

The condensed script outline for a new deceptively arty game trailer has leaked

Chopin's 'Farewell' Waltz plays over a white screen, indicating CLASSINESS. JACK (V.O.): "This is where it all began." The music grows louder, as if drawing nearer. We also hear COSY LAUGHTER and CLINKING GLASSES as the white screen starts shimmering. JACK (V.O. CONT'D): "Right here, on a perfectly typical April night."

CUT TO INT. - SHIP'S LOUNGE - NIGHT: The screen clears like fog to reveal a FANCY COCKTAIL PARTY in full swing. The brass portholes behind the buffet tables tell us that we're on an ocean liner. ELEGANT LADIES in high-collared gowns mingle with CHARMING FELLOWS in dinner jackets beneath the civilised glow of shaded sconces.

The camera weaves through the POSHY EXTRAS and then lingers on a SLINKY VIXEN in a red dress, her lowered eyes hidden by a cloche hat. JACK (V.O. CONT'D): "You probably think this story's about her." The VIXEN lifts her head, revealing stunning SAPPHIRE EYES. We track her smouldering gaze across the room until it alights on JACK, our protagonist. He's 30 years old, ruggedly handsome, and wearing a white tux with a carnation in the buttonhole. We see him swirl a MARTINI, his face shrewd, as if considering something. Now assuming JACK's perspective, we pan back to the VIXEN, zooming in on her face as she offers a coy but inviting smile. JACK (V.O. CONT'D): "But you're wrong."

The close-up widens out to reveal the words RMS TITANIC stencilled on the wall behind the VIXEN, as the Chopin music slows down and falls out of tune. We see a fast, arrhythmic montage: a looming ICEBERG; an exploding BOILER; a broken string of ROSARY BEADS, BODIES and SHIP PARTS tumbling into CHURNING WATERS; a darting MERMAID; CORRIDORS blocked by twisted WRECKAGE; a sepia CAMEO LOCKET melting in FLAMES; a STRANGE OBJECT protruding from CORAL; and other assorted CHAOS and NONSENSE. Over the JANKY CHOPIN, we hear violent sounds of SCREAMING, CRASHING, FOGHORNS, and CREEPY GIGGLES. The sounds abruptly stop as we CUT TO a WIDE SHOT of an elderly pianist with a sad, calm face, who plinks out a melancholy Moonlight Sonata as the flood water, already up to his knees, slowly rises. The screen goes dark.

> "The camera weaves through the POSHY EXTRAS and lingers on a SLINKY VIXEN"

SUPERIMPOSE OVER BLACK: 'BLOOD PUNCH GAMES PRESENTS.' The Moonlight Sonata continues playing, indicating SPOOKY GRANDEUR, and we CUT TO EXT. - OCEAN - DAY. We see a SUNRISE over a sea strewn with WRECKAGE. JACK (V.O. CONT'D): "I never saw her again."

SUPERIMPOSE OVER BLACK: 'A HIGHBROW FAKE-OUT PRODUCTION.' And then CUT TO INT. - UNDER THE OCEAN - DAY. We see a single SHAFT OF LIGHT piercing the blue-green water. The camera pans down the SHAFT, taking in brightly coloured schools of FISH and other ASSORTED WHIMSY. JACK (V.O. CONT'D): "But I thought of her often in the days that followed." SUPERIMPOSE OVER BLACK: 'TRAILER BY MISDIRECTION STUDIOS.' And then CUT TO the SHAFT OF LIGHT, still tracking downward. The light grows dimmer, and bubbles rise from the bottom of the frame. JACK (V.O. CONT'D): "She seemed like my last link to another world – gentler, more promising, more sane."

SUPERIMPOSE OVER BLACK: 'WITH ASSISTANCE FROM AWARD-BAIT ANIMATION.' We CUT TO the BUBBLES again, and the body of JACK enters the bottom of the frame (we recognise him by the carnation on his white tuxedo). He limply comes to rest on the ocean floor. The music stops with a soft SCREECH, and we watch the drowned-looking form of JACK in MEDITATIVE SILENCE. Suddenly, his eyes POP OPEN, and we glimpse movement in the nearby CORAL REEFS: a flash of GREEN-SCALED FIN; a streak of RED HAIR. We hear a melodious but ominous GIGGLE, as JACK, panicking, reaches out to grasp a STRANGE OBJECT protruding from the CORAL. JACK (V.O. CONT'D): "A link I would sever forever on the edge of a 50cc-powered blade."

SUPERIMPOSE OVER BLACK: '*SLUTTY MERMAID CHAINSAW GENOCIDE*.' And then CUT TO the OCEAN FLOOR. Limp Bizkit's Gold Cobra plays, indicating VIOLENT IDIOCY. We see JACK pull an ANACHRONISTIC CHAINSAW from the coral, his NECK VEINS BULGING HORRIBLY as he REVS it up. HARD CUT TO a frantic montage of JACK's VICIOUS and UNPROVOKED DISEMBOWELMENT of this race of SCANTILY CLAD TEENAGE MERMAIDS. We see him executing KILLER COMBOS, with UNDERWATER BLOOD SPRAY EFFECTS galore, and MERMAID LIMBS and SEASHELL BRAS flying everywhere. The montage builds to an unbearable pitch of intensity, and then screeches to a halt on JACK's blood-spattered face, as he growls his catchphrase: "Time to make some merm-alade." SUPERIMPOSE OVER BLACK: '*SLUTTY MERMAID CHAINSAW GENOCIDE*, COMING CHRISTMAS 2012.'

Brian Howe writes about books, games and more for a variety of publications, including Pitchfork and Kill Screen







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THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH



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Up-to-the-minute previews and reviews

In with the old

There are two primary audience camps, and therefore design considerations, that factor into the resurrection of old intellectual property. There are those already familiar with – and fond of – the IP, and there are those for whom this will be first contact. The conundrum is how to please both? Can a game developer possibly serve two masters?

This month's Hype is brimming with long-absent brands making a comeback. Our look at *Kid Icarus: Uprising* (p72) sees Nintendo taking a stab at bringing back an 8bit action-platformer. Some 3DS owners will feel pangs of nostalgia, but for many *Uprising* will be a blank slate. Yet if any company can keep the faithful happy while recruiting a new, younger audience, it's surely Nintendo, and its approach here could be a masterclass in meshing old iconography with new mechanics.

Next up: three franchises that emerged over a decade ago – *Hitman* (p50), *Ghost Recon* (p56) and *XCOM* (p60). All built followings with specific gameplay principles, and their returns demonstrate attempts to iterate while remaining accessible to newcomers. The danger is that these projects could become halfway houses, unable to appease the die-hards but also failing to compete with titles that have emerged during the time they've been away. If *Ghost Recon* tries but fails to match the spectacle of *Modern Warfare*, or *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* neglects the forward progress of the strategy genre, they may cancel out both sides of the audience equation.

Finally, there's this month's cover star, *Far Cry 3* (p44). Three iterations have given us three disparate plots, but rather than suggest incoherence, the *Far Cry* brand has become synonymous with a 'setup' rather than inconsistency. The founding principle of a *Far Cry* game – survival against the odds in an open world – has remained intact, offering a lynchpin around which different studios have been able to work, showing that games can, paradoxically, be both old and new.

MOST WANTED

House Of The Dead 4 PSN
More of this, please: an HD revamp of an arcade lightgun game given the full PS Move compatibility treatment. As a primer, *House Of The Dead III* is sitting on the PSN store, also with Move controls. That Sharpshooter peripheral might be getting dusted off after all.

Sound Shapes Vita
Notable by its absence at Vita's launch, *Sound Shapes* remains one of the system's most attractive propositions. Taking the indie spirit (and developer) of *Everyday Shooter*, it sees music and platforming collide on a gorgeous canvas of colour and creativity.

Pokémon + Nobunaga's Ambition DS
An intriguing crossover between *Pokémon* and Tecmo Koei's long-running turn-based strategy series *Nobunaga's Ambition*, this hybrid looks to be a visual delight as you collect 'em all to unite the 17 kingdoms of its historical setting.

Far Cry 2 offered a selection of hardened mercenaries to play as, but *Far Cry 3*'s hero is a normal guy. An aptitude for murder aside, Jason Brody's ordinariness is the point: this is the story of one man's descent into violence when he's cut off from the society he knows and has to resort to extremes to survive

HYPE

FAR CRY 3

Ubisoft returns to the tropics for an open-world shooter you may be crazy about

Publisher	Ubisoft
Developer	In-house (Montreal)
Format	360, PC, PS3
Origin	Canada
Release	2012

Combat is gimmick-free, offering a familiar toolset, but it's the freedom to use it however you see fit that sets *Far Cry 3* apart. That said, the game's upgrade system will see Brody improve his various abilities over time

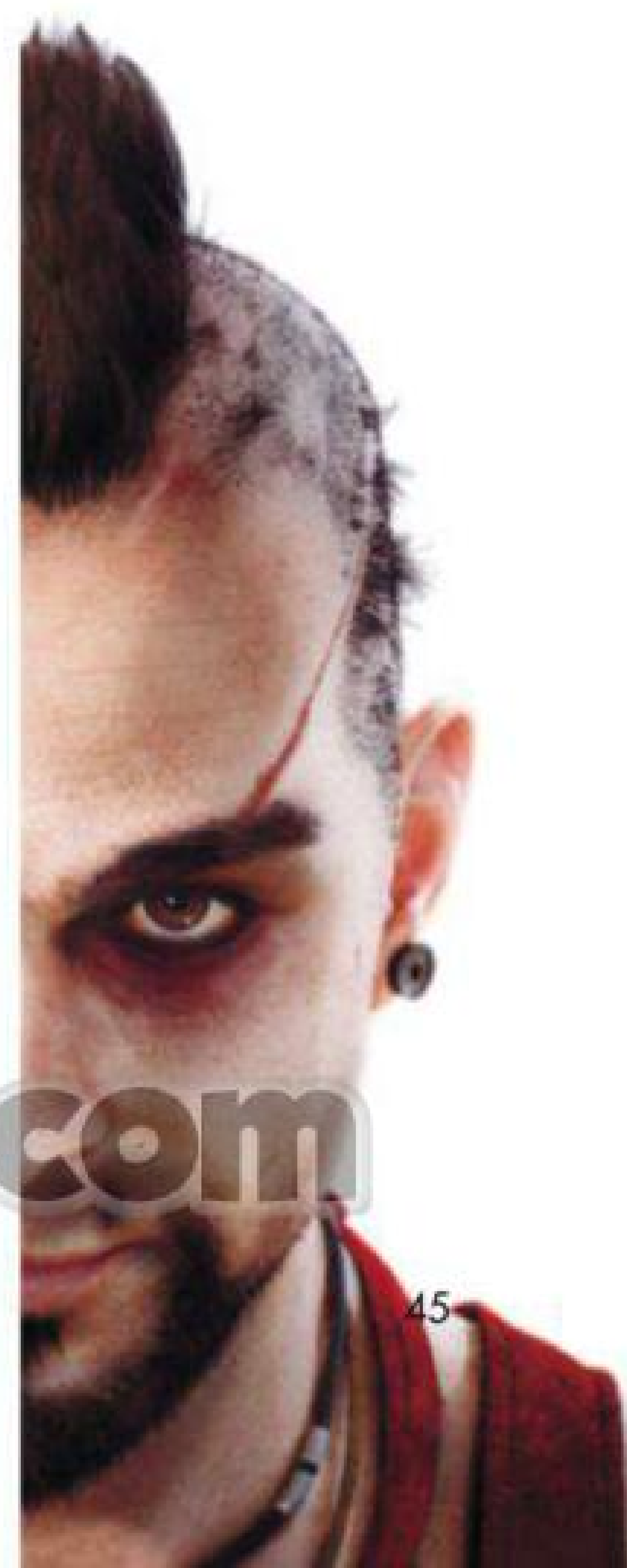
Pause *Far Cry* 3 and, alongside the usual slate of menu options, you'll see a blobby, butterfly-winged shadow of a Rorschach ink blot fill the screen, with peeks of lush foliage visible between splotches of darkness. It's the perfect symbol for a game fixated with the loss of sanity, and set on making players question their own.

Thinking can be key in its fighting too, with Ubisoft Montreal's game offering the open-ended combat the series is known for, letting players plan encounters from miles off. The approach is up to you: charge in for a frontal assault, hang back to snipe enemies from a distance, or slap a C4 charge on the side of a jeep and send it barrelling straight into an enemy encampment. But all this freedom is tied to a narrative that drops the hard-edged political cynicism of *Far Cry 2* for a focus on the personal, charting one man's spiral into violence, and quite possibly madness, on an archipelago where everyone else seems to have a head start.

One mission in particular, a hallucinatory push through an island's underground caves, illustrates the point well. Protagonist Jason Brody is injured, and looking for a doctor. After picking his way up a slope that offers a postcard-perfect view of the glistening bay below, he finds an equally pretty sight at its summit – a freshly painted bright white wooden house that serves as a reminder that South Pacific islands make pretty good retirement spots when they aren't serving as murderous hellholes.

The man who painted it – still spattered with splotches of emulsion – is found inside the greenhouse. He's unlike any doctor we've ever seen, quickly administering an injection of who knows what, but mostly rambling to himself in a jittery, dreamy fashion. His name is Dr Earnhardt, and his is simply one of the many flavours of madness that *Far Cry* 3 will present to players. In return for helping Brody, Earnhardt insists on the player getting him some mushrooms from a nearby cave system, and this fetch-quest setup is the only conventional part of the mission that follows.

First, there's no shooting. At some point the weathered AK Brody clutches at the outset of the task is lowered, and we don't see it again until much later in the session. In place of gunplay, there is platforming and exploration – Brody makes running jumps over precarious drops once he's in the caves, which can only be accessed through an underwater tunnel at the bottom of a cliff. Some scripted crumbling handholds add a dash of peril, but it's only when Brody moves farther into the caves' depths that things become truly unpredictable.





FAR CRY 3



The assault on the Medusa is a showcase for the *Far Cry* series' approach to combat. Unlike a corridor shooter, you can sneak, snipe, rampage through or even bypass these battles, and planning's encouraged

BELOW As well as native fauna, players will have domesticated animals to contend with. Exactly what form the hunting system will take is unclear, but it all seems to fit the game's theme of Brody discovering his inner savagery to survive





That's when your earlier injection begins to kick in. Colours begin to saturate before changing hue entirely. Perspective becomes unreliable, and objects that appear within reach one moment suddenly shrink from view. Brody takes a second to look at his hands, which have started leaving ephemeral trails as they move through the air. To make matters worse, the cave seems to be reshaping itself around him: walls turn to floors when he tries to climb them, and plants appear from nowhere, sprouting from the ground alongside puffs of smoke that look like more Rorschach blots. When he finally finds the mushrooms and escapes, night has fallen.

For the most part, *Far Cry* 3 isn't going to be quite this psychedelic, but the scene clearly demonstrates the preoccupation with mental states that runs throughout the game. Dr Earnhardt is crazy, the island's villains all display equally unstable tendencies, and Brody himself is clearly losing his grip. He was an ordinary man on holiday with his friends and girlfriend, but is now caught up in a situation that threatens to send him off the rails.

"[We knew] we wanted *Far Cry* 3 to be emotional and raw," explains producer **Dan Hay**, "and the word 'insanity' kind of just percolated out of those early meetings. We began to see that we wanted to have a raw emotional experience, and we wanted it to be very much the story of one person sort of caught in a moment. When we really felt like we captured it was when we got Vaas. That's when the word 'insanity' crystallised for us."

The star of the E3 2011 demo (in which he ruminated on the definition of insanity before dropping a tied-up Brody into a waterhole), Vaas is only one of *Far Cry* 3's many villains, but he's quickly become its poster child. "A sociopath, and very nearly a psychopath," in the team's words, he's also creepily charismatic. His presence stalks the island – Dr Earnhardt mutters about him, and eavesdropping on conversations between guards suggests a respect that's built on fear. Thankfully, the performance artist behind the murderer is easier to talk to.

"Vaas is a very intense, very explosive character, and he's a lot of fun to play," says actor **Michael Mando**. "He's one of those people who doesn't differentiate between what he feels, what he says and what he does."

Mando originally auditioned for the part of a more conventional villain. "He was a six-foot-six, 300lbs, very stoic, very serious, unemotional person," Mando explains. "Me being nothing like that, I auditioned for the part, and gave them the complete opposite of

> ***The true meat of the Far Cry 3 experience will be found in planning the perfect assault***

what they were looking for. And obviously I didn't get it. But my agent called me up about three weeks later telling me that Ubisoft liked the audition so much that they were willing to create a character based on the audition that I had done."

Behind the manic intensity of Mando's performance, there are hints that Vaas will be more than just a two-dimensional threat. Of



Straight shooters

It's something of a relief to see Ubisoft's demonstrator get through multiple levels without his gun falling to splinters in his hands, meaning the weapon degradation of *Far Cry 2* is out. "It's something we thought about early on, but for that we listen to the fans," explains game designer Andrea Zanni. "It didn't necessarily go over well, so when we approached *Far Cry 3* we looked at it and thought, 'What can we do with this?' And in the end we decided that it just doesn't fit the experience we want." Weapons still look anything but factory fresh, but it's the sound effects that make them truly stand out: they're thundering.



Vaas's violent intensity (above left) is in stark contrast to Dr Earnhardt (above), whose distracted and rather nervous persona gives the unshakeable impression of an addict who's suffering from withdrawal symptoms



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Screenshot gallery

Ubisoft's own diagnosis, he says: "Personally, I don't think of Vaas as a sociopath or a villain. If you get under the surface of Vaas, there's this incredible amount of pain. Everything's just an extension of that."

Players, however, probably won't be feeling so sympathetic towards the character. It's unclear whether or not Vaas is personally holding Brody's loved ones captive, but he's obviously an obstacle to their safe return. The next part of our demo sees Brody sent to disrupt Vaas's communications by shutting down the radio tower of a beached cargo ship named the Medusa. It's a set-piece designed to show off the fact that, despite *Far Cry 3*'s madness theme, the game is still, in Hay's words, "a shooter first".

Starting out in the ocean, Brody creeps onto the beach before quietly pulling a knife from a guard's back pocket and stabbing him with it. He does the same for another guard, before throwing that knife into a third's skull, a signature move that appeared in the E3 demo. Within range of the boat now, he pulls out a pair of binoculars – a *Far Cry* staple – and assesses the situation.

Ubisoft Montreal is promising a '360 degree' approach to gameplay design, with every scenario tailored to offer stealthy, action-focused and creative approaches. In truth, this is little more than an extension of the open-endedness that was already part of the *Far Cry* experience, but this beachfront set-piece demonstrates the point well. The sand is strewn with cover for those who want an open-air gunfight, while stealthier players can hide within the exposed hold of another beached vessel as they move towards their goal. One tester, we're told, simply hopped on a distant hang-glider and coasted to the radio tower, bypassing the battle entirely. After our demonstrator opts for an aggressive approach, reinforcements begin landing in hovercraft on the beach. It's a section rich with possibility, and the true meat of the experience will be found – as with *Far Cry 2* – in planning the perfect assault.

The *Far Cry* series has been built on and around these moments, so what we see next



is a surprise. It's a sliver of a later mission, in which Brody has infiltrated a (this time seaborne) ship in search of a friend. The environment is more linear, of course, with fewer options to plan, but it's a brilliant opportunity for Ubisoft to show off an ear-splitting shotgun at close quarters. And when Brody slides open the hold doors, he triggers an explosive booby trap, flooding the ship. His struggle to escape is the kind of scripted set-piece that makes up the entirety of games such as *Call Of Duty*, and is more than a little reminiscent of a chapter in *Uncharted 3*.

This blending of open-ended design and adrenaline-fuelled scripting should make for a less predictable game than *Far Cry 2*, which – for all its ambition – suffered from the kind of clockwork mission layouts that could easily lead to fatigue. But, of course, it's not the only departure from the second game. Ubisoft has returned to sun-drenched archipelagos from whence the series came, and it's clear that the team is thrilled to be back.

"It wasn't like we set out to make it on an island," Hay explains, "but we wanted it to be a lawless frontier, we wanted it to be beautiful, all that stuff. The more we talked about it, and the kinds of experiences we wanted to have, the more we wanted the feeling of isolation."

The South Pacific setting certainly offers an attractive blend of beauty and savagery, with the western fantasy of a tropical paradise melting away to reveal a violent struggle to survive. As open-world designer **Jamie Keen** explains, "We want to make sure that it feels consistently like an area in the Indian Ocean: Pacific Islands, Polynesian islands, that kind of thing. But we're not trying to limit it too much. The main thing is that this is an island of insanity where anything goes, that the roughness comes through in the art".

And it's not just a static environment, either. When Brody ended his drugged trip through the caves earlier we spotted a rather large lizard foraging in the nearby grass that our demonstrator was careful to avoid. "The island's ecology is a big part of what we focused on to make sure the island is livable and breathable," says game designer **Andrea Zanni**. "We have land animals and sea animals. They'll be there as threats, they'll be there for you to utilise – you can go out into the jungle and go hunting, which is all part of Jason growing and surviving on the island. If you go deep into the jungle, you're going to have some encounters that may not be so pleasant. So they're a part of the ecology of the island, and really making the island this savage place for the player." Obviously, the lizard we spotted near the caves is one such creature, but it's a brief glimpse of sharks circling bodies floating in clouds of blood following the ship's explosion that sends primal shivers vibrating through the spine.

Everyone we talk to hints that there's a dark history to the archipelago, although they're coy about specifics. Regardless, it seems to be spotted with enough inviting caves, mysterious ruins, and abandoned habitations that players will be itching to explore. "It's about making sure that the player is constantly feeling enabled by what you can do in the world and enabled by the world itself," says Keen. "You feel like the world's inviting you to make you feel like you constantly want to move through it, constantly want to know more about what's going on there. Recently, we put a mineshaft just on the way down to a lighthouse. And players heading to the lighthouse see it, and everyone just goes, 'Oh look, a mineshaft!' and they have to explore. We want to constantly surprise people [with] how much they're going to find when they do go exploring and follow their nose."

"It wasn't like we set out to make it on an island, but we wanted a lawless frontier"

Whatever players discover in *Far Cry 3*, it's unlikely to be pleasant. Ubisoft Montreal has crafted a space that hides what appears to be a very dark heart not far beneath its beautiful surface. *Far Cry 3* may have left the weighty themes of arms dealing and civil war behind, but in their place is a more intimate tale of madness and survival. And this story will play out in a setting that retains the series' unfashionable penchant for giving its players genuine freedom in the age of the set-piece.

Q&A
Dan Hay
Producer,
Ubisoft Montreal



There have been three very different *Far Cry* games – what's the connecting thread that links them all together?
It's a raw experience, first and foremost. In the *Far Cry* games, you're dealing with rough tools, you're dealing with a place that's remote – it's always distant, it's always off the map. And, for us, we wanted it to feel exotic. You think about the types of weapons used: they're rough weapons, they're not polished… They're almost black market in some cases. You think about the location: it's usually way, way off the grid, and it's almost like a lawless frontier. So we knew we wanted to start in that type of place, and then the other area that's been the thing we want to pull from is this feeling of discovery.

How much have you researched mental disorders for the madness theme?
Quite a bit… We spent a ton of time focusing on trying to make sure that we had credible people in the world. We actually went out and we talked to guys who deal with these types of characters for a living. There's a group of journalists who, I don't know if you've seen the Vice Guide To Liberia, or the Vice Guide to a whole bunch of places, but they go out and put themselves in harm's way. And in order to make sure that we're making a credible experience, that we're making characters that are real – even though they are insane – we sat down with these guys and said here's what we got: "We've got Vaas, we've got the doctor; how do you feel about them?" And they began to tell us stories about some of people who they met, some of the unique instances that they got into, and we were like, "That sounds a lot like some of the things that we have in the game." Then we put Vaas onscreen, and we put the doctor onscreen, and we got a little smile. They were like, "OK, yep, I feel like I've met that guy…"

Will the insanity-themed moments be integrated with the rest of the game?
For us, we wanted to offer discovery and opportunity, so it's an offering. The key thing is it's an offering. It was more about the idea of: 'OK, we want to be a great shooter, and then we want to offer the enticement of going in and going off the rails a little bit. So we offer the palate cleanse. You've been shooting for a while, and Jason has that experience. It can't be high-octane boss, boss, boss all the time unless you've got something that's in contrast to it. But if you're a core shooter player and you want to go mission to mission to mission [then] you still have that opportunity.

Far Cry 2's savannah was perfect for its fire-based gameplay, but the return to islands linked by rivers and ocean should offer plenty of opportunities to sneak up on unsuspecting targets such as these

Zip-lines link boats on the shore. They're handy in battle, but we've also seen some that appear to be placed to allow for quick movement around the islands



H Y
P E

HITMAN: ABSOLUTION

Can new abilities redeem a different breed of Agent 47 for series fans?

Publisher	Square Enix
Developer	IO Interactive
Format	360, PC, PS3
Origin	Denmark
Release	2012

The mission is simple: rescue a young girl from an orphanage that's been overrun by violent, masked mercenaries. But when a representative from IO Interactive plays through this level twice in order to demonstrate the breadth of strategy that *Hitman: Absolution* will offer, the pair of approaches we see couldn't be more distinct.

The first time around, Agent 47 creeps and skulks through the orphanage's blood-stained halls, sticking to cover, crawling through air vents, and taking care to avoid being spotted by making timely dashes from point to point. Eventually, 47 quietly subdues a guard and hides the body in a laundry bin, stealing his outfit in order to walk among the rest of the hired killers undetected.

The second playthrough, however, is carnage. Where before guards were overcome with sleeper holds, now necks are snapped and bones are broken in savage takedowns. The stealthy 47 improvised his way from room to room, throwing toys to distract his foes, and borrowing syringe-based sedatives found in the medical wing. His violent alter ego is equally happy to make use of items left lying around, but it's the fire axe he seems to prefer. Previous titles saw 47 fumble up close – at least when he wasn't attacking from behind – but melee combat in *Absolution* does a better job of preserving its star's proficiency. There's a hint of QTE about the takedowns, though, with split-second slowdown telegraphing when it's time for you to land the next blow.

Slowdown also features in a new gunplay mechanic called 'point shooting', which explosively ends this second attempt at the level. Functioning like *Splinter Cell*'s mark-and-execute manoeuvre crossed with *Red Dead Redemption* star John Marston's Dead Eye, it sees 47 burst through a door before time slows, enabling our representative to paint enemy targets. When time returns to normal, we see the mercenaries torn apart in a series of cinematic close-ups.

> *Where before guards were overcome with sleeper holds, now necks are snapped*

It's very different kind of assassin we see in each take on this compact, tightly designed level, then. Which is appropriate, since our demonstrations seem more focused on showing off the upgraded abilities and flexibility of an empowered 47, rather than revealing multiple routes. (Levels are, however,

RIGHT **Bodies must be hidden after a stealth takedown, but there's often somewhere nearby to stash them, such as a laundry basket, rubbish chute or even, in one case, a children's ball pit**





www.bit.ly/yDBBr9
Screenshot gallery





HITMAN:
ABSOLUTION



47 might begin our demo in this priest disguise, but it's totally useless against the mercs. It does, however, suggest that the previous checkpoint through the orphanage's outer reaches will have a more civilian focus

split into 'checkpoints', each throwing up distinct challenges.) The series' backstory has always had 47 as a genetically superior man-made assassin, but until now he's only been as dangerous as the player controlling him was clever. His new abilities have moved him more clearly beyond the realms of an ordinary human. "What we're really trying to achieve when players put the suit on", explains global brand director **Jon Brooke**, "is that they feel empowered, like they're in control of the ultimate killing machine."

There's still a range of tactical options in the checkpoint we're shown, but in this instance at least, they're more tightly woven around one another than the open sandbox levels of past *Hitman* titles. Sneaky players are offered that air vent rather than a backdoor, for example, and overall the level we see recalls the complex, layered interiors of one of the more focused *Deus Ex* stages.



IO is keen to emphasise a Bourne-like ability to use improvised tools. It seems that 47's best improvisation is done with pointier objects, although he can throw items he's found as a distraction

But within this narrower space, the game is surprisingly responsive to every act you make. Early on, 47 sneaks up on three of the mercs torturing a security guard. Save him, and he'll tell you where a shotgun is hidden in the level – and since you'd have to be a rather direct assassin to take on three guards in the first place, it's an appropriate reward. Take advantage of their distraction to sneak on by, however, and later the same three guards will stroll back through the level, cracking jokes about their victim and possibly catching you unaware as you try to hide. Later on, 47 hides a body (and himself) in an empty wardrobe. While he's there, a guard wanders up – seemingly suspicious – only to pause to urinate outside the door. And when 47's disguised as one of the masked thugs himself, he manages to engineer a genuine case of mistaken identity. Two mercs are patrolling a room, so when one has his back turned, 47 puts the other in a sleeper hold and hides his body. When the first guard turns around, he carries on talking to 47 as if nothing were amiss. It's all scripted, of course, but the reactions manage to convey a greater sense of responsiveness than the clockwork levels of old. The dynamic score, meanwhile, keeps pace with the player, increasing in intensity as 47's enemies draw near, and punctuating potential threats, such as the lights in a room being turned on, with jolting stabs.

Both playthoughs, but in particular the stealthier one (which we're told was up to 'professional', not 'silent assassin', standard), rely heavily on 47's new Instinct powers. This umbrella mechanic underlies most of the



Narrative verdict

The grimy, gloss-free take on criminality exemplified by IO's *Kane & Lynch* is also on show in *Absolution*. The orphanage mission is a personal job for 47 – he's been sent to rescue the girl, Victoria, by ex-handler Diana Burnwood. It was the latter's dying wish, in fact, as shown in a trailer that reveals 47 was sent after Diana by his own agency. The mercenaries, meanwhile, have been hired by corpulent US businessman Blake Dexter, and are led by a limp-haired, unhealthy looking rival killer called Wade (left). The dialogue is profanity-laden and graphic, too, with the blackly comic tone of previous games less evident.



Situations such as this one should help tempt stealthier players toward more violent paths, adding a neat optional moral dilemma in a series that has traditionally been as amoral as its lead



While not especially heavy on the viscera, violence in *Absolution* is communicated through a grisly mixture of brutal animation and wet, crunching sound effects

gameplay elements in some form, and is another way in which the focus has shifted to 47's heightened abilities. Being able to view enemies through walls – their patrol route extending from them as a burning trail – breaks your immersion far less than the magic map screen of *Absolution*'s forbearers. It gives players the information they need to play a lethal predator without trial-and-error restarts, although it does shift the focus away from route planning and towards moment-to-moment positioning. Point shooting also uses Instinct, which takes the form of a bar topped up by 'skillful play' – such as takedowns – in order to ration it. A less satisfying use of your newfound power is tied to disguises: holding the Instinct button will help avert suspicion when 47 passes guards, which seems to distract from the focus on acting the part that good disguise-based play should require.

But the nagging question remaining for *Absolution* is simple: how much haven't we seen? Both levels showcased so far have been filled with alert foes (mercenaries in this instance and cops in the E3 demo) and have seen 47 creeping through places he's not supposed to be. Yet classic *Hitman* levels have taken place in hotels, on suburban streets and at parties – civilian environments where an assassin can hide in plain sight – and it's the integration of *Absolution*'s new mechanics with those levels that will be the game's real test. What's more, the teasing end of the E3 demo, which saw 47 absorbed by a teeming crowd, suggests that such levels could take place on a scale bigger than anything we've seen before. Since *Absolution*'s core systems appear as flexibly violent as a professional assassin's skill set should be, we'd now like to try them out for ourselves on a proper hit. ■

Q&A
Tore Blystad
Game director, Hitman: Absolution



Did you deliberately set out to make more of Agent 47's abilities?
It was a strong ambition when we started the project. We had this character who was supposed to be the ultimate assassin and a really trained guy. And when you actually played through levels, it didn't really feel that way. He wasn't that easy to control and the mechanics didn't come that naturally to the player. We stood back and said, 'If the game is much more about him, this great assassin who you can play, and [you can] perform the moves without difficultly, then it'll become much more about the consequences of those actions and containing situations.'

Is that how point shooting evolved?
Coming back to 47 as a character, he's this expert assassin, he has every training possible in his past. So of course he's an expert marksman. He's good with weapons. His signature weapons are firearms. In previous games, they've always been underplayed – going into action it felt like things were falling apart. We wanted shooting to feel like a natural part of the game… Point shooting came in as a way of giving something that would be the extra icing on the cake for people who choose to play in an action-orientated way, combined with a strong desire to make it as cinematic as we could. We can't do that during normal gameplay, but during point shooting the player decides how to perform the action and we try to 'film' that as cinematically as we can, though you can skip through it with the push of a button.

How do you stop levels descending into bloodbaths too quickly?
In the old games, the AI had a hive mind: when one attacked, they all did. But if you fire a gun at any point in *Absolution*, the sound range is, well, if you're inside I think it's 30 or 40 metres. Beyond that, the AI won't care. So if you start a gunfight in an area and you're able to contain it, you've solved the situation. And if you can hide the bodies so that no one will find them later, you can go back to stealth. So weapons have become more powerful as a tool, you can use them without destroying the entire setup of a level. Also, the AI can defend positions.

How many levels are in civilian settings?
Most of scenarios in the game are civilian levels, like in the last game. It's a big focus for us to make levels and settings that are uncommon, and where the ambiance of the setting will tell a lot of stories. You can't do that if you have lot of secret bases.

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GHOST RECON:

FUTURE SOLDIER

Ubisoft breaks cover and reveals its variety show of a stealth shooter

Publisher	Ubisoft
Developer	Ubisoft Paris, Ubisoft Red Storm
Format	360, PS3
Origin	France, US
Release	May

According to Ubisoft Paris level designer **Florent Guillaume**, the process of making *Ghost Recon: Future Soldier* "was an interesting way to work. There was lots of prototyping, with levels like gameplay blocks we could rearrange." The truth of his words becomes evident in our hands-on session with the singleplayer campaign: no two missions feel the same, and the most polarised, and gripping, of those we dip into are opposites in both pace and structure.

The first is a manic shootout through the streets of Peshawar, Pakistan. With traffic at a standstill, you and your three fellow Ghosts need to push through a miniature army of enemy soldiers and panicked oncoming civilians to reach the other end of the main street. Vehicles can be used for cover, but the aggressive enemies, many wielding shotguns and hellbent on close-range kills, mean that you have to keep your blind spots under careful observation. The best strategy, then, is to make use of your gadgetry. Throw a drone up into the air (selected with the D-pad and launched like a grenade with a tap of the left bumper) and you can scan the area ahead for hostiles. Its elevation needs to be controlled via triggers to avoid detection, but once you have the enemy in your sights a press of the right bumper can tag up to four units for your squadmates to prioritise or eliminate simultaneously on your command.

Civilians react dynamically, meaning their crazed dash is unpredictable and alarming

Objective commands such as these and orders to heal downed teammates are the only directions you need to give your squad – they will otherwise traverse the warzone of their own accord, never breaking cover unless ordered to do so. This means not having to worry about AI foul-ups, or about pathfinding mistakes that might screw up your game plan, freeing you to focus on keeping yourself alive, which is easier said than done. That's because the *Ghost Recon* series' use of realistic levels of player vulnerability has survived the leap to this latest iteration, giving the game a sense of threat that's rare in the genre outside of the likes of *Operation Flashpoint*. There's also the added factor of civilian casualties: if too many die, then it's game over. Civilians react dynamically, too, meaning their crazed dash through the streets – like a scene from the running of the bulls in Pamplona – is both unpredictable and alarming.

Having taken down the immediate threats in our recce of the level, there's the small issue of a turret gunner blocking our path to victory before a chopper evac and traditional heli-gun section. To overcome this obstacle, a downward tap of the D-pad fires up your X-ray vision, allowing you to snipe through a vehicle and move on to the next phase of the mission. If that sounds a little like science fiction, the team remains adamant that it has grounded its tech and tactics in realism. It was even aided by a team of special forces consultants during development of the game (and, not least, the guiding hand of series veteran Ubisoft Red Storm). If there's a bad note in the Peshawar mission, it's the helicopter gunning part. Less attractive than those of previous games, and more tedious, it's a break in the level's flow that comes off as forced, its linearity clashing with the open-ended feel of the preceding section.

The next mission we plunge into couldn't be pitched further from the clear and present danger of Peshawar. Set in a deep forest that's dense with vegetation and gorgeously detailed, there's a deadly silence to the atmosphere that instinctively causes you to take cover every step of the way. This is when *Future Soldier*'s camouflage system comes into play. Staying in cover and moving slowly causes your stealth camouflage to kick in automatically. If you're detected or move too briskly, you're plain for all to see. There's a user-friendliness here that feels more casual than the unforgiving nature of classic *Ghost Recon*, but it's another thing less to worry about as you creep and crawl through the undergrowth, surveying enemy outposts disguised as, and surrounded by, lumberyards. Melee stealth kills come in handy on your approach to the enemy bases and close-range



www.bit.ly/y4IsLk
Screenshot gallery



GHOST RECON: FUTURE SOLDIER



RIGHT **Environments take in everything from homages to original *Ghost Recon* maps to sprawling urban warzones.** BELOW RIGHT **The visual design is far less sci-fi-oriented than that of E3 2010's demo; the general idea is to keep the narrative and feel as close to Tom Clancy canon as possible**



weapons prove integral to the claustrophobic shootouts that erupt in a split second. Roadie runs to and from cover are vital in the thick of it, too, and the camera's bob and sway gives the action a cinematic slant. The motion capture of the Ghosts, with an alleged 2,500-plus animations, also adds a level of realism as you roll over and dive into cover.

The overall look of the game, however, feels removed from the more gritty, hard-edged and rather clinical look of previous titles. Character models are chunky and rounded, and the environments themselves look far more colourful and inviting than the cold, barren sterility of *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter*. There's a gloss to *Future Soldier* that screams casual rather than hardcore, which is perhaps a result of the military-themed shooter's paradigm shift to narrative-led, Hollywood-style thrills since *Ghost Recon*'s previous console outing in 2007.

Although the settings and style of the two missions we see are vastly different, both can be tackled with either strategic stealth or gung-ho gunnery – there's no wrong way to navigate *Future Soldier*'s skirmishes and tackle its threats. Playing the scenarios with three human squadmates will be the true test of the game's strategic options and replay value, but on this showing there's a variety to combat that gives you a strong sense of being in charge without drowning you in menus. As a halfway house between action game and military simulation, *Future Soldier* simultaneously strikes the chords of accessibility and depth that *Operation Flashpoint* so fatally missed last year. If the rest of the missions on offer can build on the variety and scale that's been demonstrated here, Ubisoft might well be able to offer something for everyone. We do know, however, that they're set to take place on an international stage that includes Russia, and with a few nods to classic *Ghost Recon* maps.

While *Future Soldier* may have been designed as a cooperative experience, the quality of the enemy and teammate AI is strong enough to make it a considerable proposition for lone players. As such, the absence of a narrative in our time with the game, even though it's never played a prominent role in the series to date, is now more noticeable. *Future Soldier*'s vibrant new aesthetic feels in dire need of a coherent story to add some blockbuster intrigue to its luscious looks, and hopefully the writers have spun a Clancy-style yarn bold enough to match its production values.



What are ya building?

Gunsmith mode is a rifle range that allows you to test and create weapons, the latter being done with parts earned through the campaign. Bizarrely, it supports Kinect, too. Hand gestures flick through weapon sets and dismantle guns for you to reassemble as you please (providing you adhere to plausible combinations). Shout 'badass' and you'll be provided with a randomised firearm fit for a hero. In the range, your outstretched arm, fist clenched, aims the weapon, while opening up your hand fires. Tilting left or right moves you around. It's entertaining, but after a few minutes' play you'll likely want to revert to a controller.



While stealth and infiltration are integral, there's a wealth of big bangs and scorching explosions on offer as well. Firefights are tense affairs: stay exposed for too long and you'll soon find yourself cut down by enemy bullets





ABOVE **Cover may be essential for survival, but you needn't worry about your squad. Their AI means they will take the initiative and guard their lives dearly.** RIGHT **Launching a drone into the skies gives you a better tactical view of the situation. Tagging enemies for your men to sequentially or simultaneously take down is a blessing when you're trapped behind enemy lines**

Q&A Jean-Marc Geffroy



Creative director, *Ghost Recon: Future Soldier*

What were your aims with *Future Soldier*?
The way we thought about the game was: 'We need to be faithful to what the brand is – a smart shooter.' We wanted to bring back the flavour of the original *Ghost Recon*; some levels are a tribute to that. Another thing was that because we had consultants who are former Navy Seals, they gave us a new way of thinking what a spec ops game is. We weren't making a war game – these guys are often coming to prevent war, [to] rescue and eliminate people. Just talking to [the consultants] was interesting and made us try to be more realistic, bring it closer to their job.

Action games have placed a stronger emphasis on narrative in the past few years. How are you addressing this?
It's at the heart of the experience we want to give. We have seen how shooters have evolved towards a more over-the-top Hollywood style. But, for us, we can't imagine the Ghosts in London [as in *Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 3*] – that's not Tom Clancy. We don't want to be 'me-too', we want to be faithful to Tom Clancy. What is Clancy? Realism, as much gameplay freedom as possible, and trying not to be too over the top.

The setting is near-future – how did you go about designing that world?
The technology of tomorrow in the world of tomorrow is science fiction – it doesn't show how Ghosts are unique today. So the world of *Future Soldier* is the world of today. If you are four guys against 50 and you can kill them with just a gun, it means you're superior – you're not spec ops. So in order to fight a large number, you must be cleverer, have more information and train hard. That's what makes you special ops: to solve these situations not only by shooting.

Why has there been such a big gap between *Advanced Warfighter 2* and this?
When we wanted to renew the brand, we needed to iterate. We made some iterations that led us to a wall. Spending months [developing] and then saying it doesn't work. The E3 demo of 2010 was a little bit too sci-fi. All this technology wasn't easily understandable or real, the setting wasn't exactly what we wanted, we went too far with the exoskeleton and stuff like that. We stepped back and said: "We need a consultant." The AI was also key. We wanted an environment in which the player could trigger the fight when they wanted. We rewrote all the AI. Another thing was co-op. If we had a player-centric, scripted AI, it was impossible with four players.

HYPE

XCOM: ENEMY UNKNOWN

Sid Meier's studio steps up to tackle the alien invasion

Publisher	2K Games
Developer	Firaxis Games
Format	360, PC, PS3
Origin	US
Release	2012

You might have heard the outcry when *XCOM*, a firstperson shooter based on the turn-based alien-battling franchise, was announced in 2010. It had been 16 years since the original *X-COM: UFO Defense* (also known as *UFO: Enemy Unknown*), and nine years since the disappointing *X-COM: Enforcer* limped into the world. Now the beloved series was returning, but not in the way fans had hoped. 'Why aren't they making a turn-based strategy game?' the Internet howled.

It turns out someone was. Firaxis, creator of the *Civilization* series, began work on *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* in spring of 2007. "Certainly there have been times where it's been difficult to keep it a secret," explains **Jake Solomon**, *Enemy Unknown*'s lead designer. "Maybe this is corny, but you like to make people happy. I think the kick we get as game developers is giving people this experience that makes them happy, and so when you think you have something that'll make people happy, you want to share that."



Solomon is sharing plenty now. *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* isn't just ready to be announced, but almost finished. It's playable from beginning to end, and looks like everything fans of the series have been pining for. Once again, you're cast as the leader of an international organisation established to fight the aliens invading earth. Your duties span everything from forward planning to day-to-day minutiae, so you'll be in charge of building and expanding your underground base, researching new technologies and equipment, and launching satellites to scan the world for the alien menace. You'll also shape your soldiers, deal with the shadowy board of benefactors who fund your operation, and take control of the ground combat against the wildly strange aliens harassing the planet.

These are disparate elements, but the glory of the original *X-COM*'s experience was the through-line it drew between your roles. A choice made in your base would impact on a skirmish you'd fight hours later. The game forced you to make hard decisions in the face of high stakes, and you'd lose yourself in the fight for Earth as the hours flew by.

Your base is no longer a top-down map, but a bustling side-on ant farm

As Solomon shows us his version of *Enemy Unknown* for the first time, we get a look at your new base. It's no longer a top-down map, but a bustling side-on ant farm. Scientists are tapping at computers in the labs. New recruits are wandering the halls, exercising, playing



www.bit.ly/AFoGyz
Screenshot gallery

Scenery items such as bus stops and every wall in the game can be destroyed by your squad, but this isn't *Red Faction*: for floors like this, you must strike at preset weak points

XCOM's base has morphed from a 2D blueprint into a living place, with soldiers scuttling from room to room. The Geoscape is one of many familiar elements given a suitable makeover





XCOM:
ENEMY
UNKNOWN



Firaxis' intentions for *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* are split. The team are fans of the original, desperate to maintain its charm, permadeath, and scale. At the same time, the game needs to be modernised. That means a sticky cover system and bringing it to consoles

games, and visiting injured friends in the infirmary. It looks like a beautiful 2D image, but its 3D nature is revealed as the player cycles through the menu and the camera swoops inside these rooms. So you'll head into the science lab to make decisions about the next weapon technology to research, or down to the barracks when you want to give silly nicknames to your soldiers.

When you're ready to fight, you visit mission control. This looks like the Geoscape from the original game, with the Earth spinning in the vastness of space. It's here you can launch satellites to improve your ability to detect aliens, scramble interceptors to attack UFOs in the air, and load a Skyranger with up to six soldiers to go and face the aliens.

When Solomon hops into ground combat, things look even more like older *X-COMs*. The camera is peering down upon a small group of soldiers awaiting orders outside a petrol station, and most of the world is obscured by the fog of war. It looks good, if not stunning, and there's a chunkiness to the characters that evokes the low-res sprites of the original.

Each soldier in your squad can move and perform a single action each turn, where an action is anything from shooting their weapon to tossing a grenade to any one of dozens of special abilities. You begin not knowing where the aliens are, so Solomon starts by moving his squad behind cover. The new cover system makes his recruits duck automatically behind the nearest piece of scenery. Almost immediately, one spots a Sectoid.

Sectoids are the most iconic aliens from the original *X-COM*, and look like pop culture's classic extraterrestrials: grey, small and skinny with big, slick heads and shining eyes. When the soldier spots them, a three-second, in-engine cutscene calls attention to their arrival. It's a small use of the Unreal Engine 3 that powers the game, and one of a few concessions to the cinematic gaming world into which *XCOM* is being reborn.

Back on the ground, one of the Sectoids moves inside the petrol station, while another ducks behind a nearby car. Solomon's sniper is carrying special equipment that lets her grapple on top of objects, and he moves her onto the roof above the petrol pumps. He then tells his heavy soldier to lay down suppressing fire to keep the Sectoid in place behind the car, and has another toss a grenade inside the vehicle. It explodes, and the camera cuts in close for a second time to show the explosion.

Classes are another big change to *XCOM*. Equipment still plays an enormous part in



Firaxis has spent a long time on *XCOM*'s aliens. The Sectoids were a challenge, and early versions made Sid Meier uncomfortable, because he said they made it feel like shooting at kids



Life cycle

As XCOM commander, part of your task will be managing your specialised group of soldiers. You'll sculpt each of your recruits by customising their appearance, giving them a name and a nickname, and levelling them from a weak and panicky rookie into an adept and wonderfully useful killing machine. The joy of all the tough decisions involved is that they make you care. It's painful, therefore, when you lose a recruit, especially since death is not merely penalised in *Enemy Unknown*, but permanent. It's almost always your fault for making a poor decision, and losing a recruit can feel like a favourite toy being broken.



Research lets you unlock access to new kit, such as the grapple hook suit that lets snipers climb rooftops. Your scientists can also reverse engineer alien tech from crashed UFOs

A heavy soldier typically carries a large machine gun and has a rocket launcher strapped to his back. This makes him perfect for suppressing Sectoids while the rest of your squad flanks



defining the role of each squad member, and you continue to need to micromanage what your team is carrying, but your soldiers are no longer defined by an enormous list of stats. Instead, each recruit has a class (heavy, sniper, assault and support), a small number of statistics that increase automatically, and a selection of special abilities, which the player chooses each time the soldier levels up. The aim isn't to make the game less complicated, but to find a way to introduce more abilities and complexity than before and still make sure players understand the consequences of the decisions they're making.

With the Sectoids now dealt with, one of the recruits moves inside the petrol station. Another short cutscene plays when he spots Mutons inside. These are effectively gorillas in shoulder-pad spacesuits, and much tougher and more aggressive than the Sectoids Solomon slaughtered. One of the Mutons fires and instantly takes out the recruit, which means he's gone for good (see 'Life cycle').

Fortunately, permadeath isn't the only returning core feature in *Enemy Unknown*. The world you're fighting for is as destructible as ever. Solomon tells his heavy soldier to fire a rocket launcher at the side of the petrol station, and the entire wall crumbles. The sniper, still waiting patiently on the rooftop, now has direct line of sight to the Mutons inside, and takes them both down in a couple of turns. This was an easy mission, and still another name was added to the memorial room back at base. Firaxis' own mission is much harder, however: to satisfy fans of the original *X-COM*, recreate it for a modern audience, and bring its full experience to consoles. From seeing this thin slice of the game, it seems it might just win the fight. ■

Q&A
Jake Solomon
Lead designer, *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*



When did you play the original *X-COM: Enemy Unknown*?
I was 18, and I came to it a little bit after it was out, '94 or '95. My brothers and I were big game players, so late at night we'd sneak downstairs and take turns for one hour. It just totally blew my mind, and since I was going to college the next year, that's why I went into computer science. Even once I had my degree, I didn't really think about game development until later on, when I got this opportunity with Firaxis, which was kind of out of the blue.

How did you end up becoming Sid Meier's right-hand man?
I think it probably started out with me pestering him. I like to think Sid saw something in me, but that's totally not true. I was always giving him feedback, and we have this great relationship, because I'm really coarse and loud and obnoxious, and Sid is quiet and just the nicest person on the face of the Earth. We have this relationship where I'm talking and being loud and Sid's always like, [whispers] "OK, calm down." On [*Civilization Revolution*] and on *Pirates!*, he really started to help me form my own design instincts and then, coming on to this project, he's been my mentor. I go back to him all the time. I'm now at the point where I can basically hear his voice in my head, which is probably not healthy. He tells me to hurt people. [Laughs.] But no. Brian Reynolds and Soren Johnson and I, we all say the same thing, which is that he's the smartest, most amazing guy we've ever met. It's one thing to be a designer, and it's another to meet Sid and be like, 'OK, now that's a designer.'

What did you learn from bringing *Civilization Revolution* to consoles?
Civ Rev is very much a lighter, faster version of *Civilization*, but with *XCOM* you're going to get the full experience. Because, when it comes to input, *XCOM* is not particularly complicated. I don't feel the need to streamline any aspects of gameplay, because [your] interaction with the game experience is still simple.

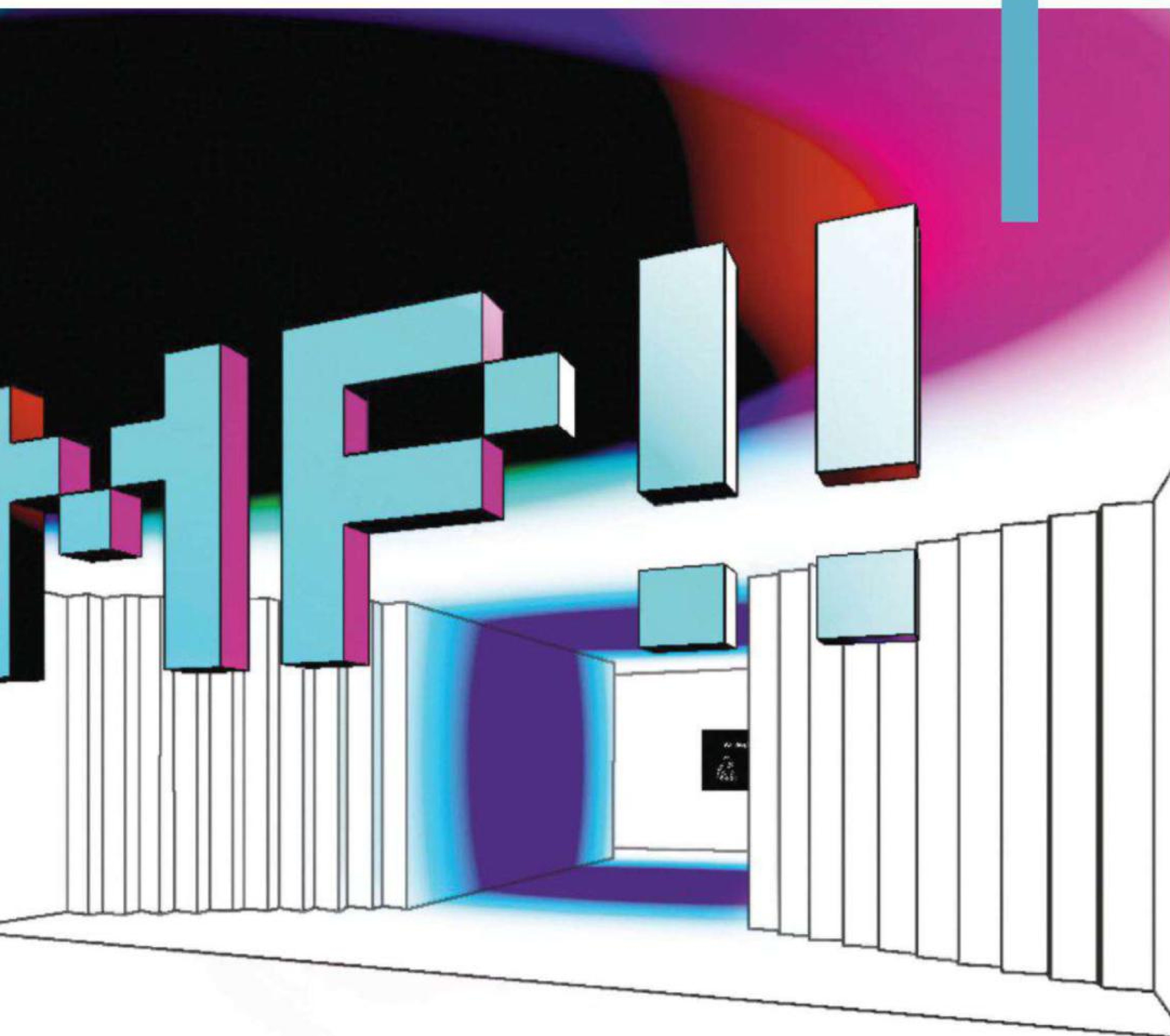
Do you think there's a big audience for turn-based games on consoles?
I think the audience exists, and we did pretty good numbers with *Civ Rev*. *XCOM* is not like any other game, so it's hard to make those hard comparisons, but it's a question of do people want this deeper experience? I think they do. Regardless, we're not going to change the design philosophy based on the platform. If we feel something is going to make the best game, that's what we're going to do.

H | Y
P | E

ANTICHAMBER

Up is down and down is up in this non-Euclidean labyrinth

Publisher	Alexander Bruce
Developer	Alexander Bruce
Format	PC
Origin	Australia
Release	2012



Many games have drawn visual inspiration from Dutch artist MC Escher's oeuvre of intricate, mathematics-inspired works, but few have attempted to wholly immerse you in the mind-bending aesthetic geometry of such a world. Firstperson puzzler *Antichamber* is one such game. Indie developer **Alexander Bruce** has spent the past two years travelling the globe showing off his passion project at festivals and submitting it to competitions. Make Something Unreal ultimately kickstarted the game's development and funding, granting Bruce $25,000 to get the ball properly rolling. "They were pretty impressed with how I'd bastardised their engine," he tells us. But there's another bonus to be wrought from Bruce's tactic of carpet-bombing industry events: free focus testing. "*Antichamber* ended up where it is as a result of watching thousands of people play the game at festivals. Every time the game was showcased at an event, I'd have an intense several days of watching everyone who played, half watching the screen and half reading their faces while I tried to work out what was going on in their heads. After each event, I would then spend several months addressing all of the issues that I'd seen, before putting the game back in front of more people at another festival and repeating the process."

If the concept of an art-game crossover has you philosophising, hold those thoughts because the game has some built-in philosophy of its own to greet you the moment you enter its cerebral air space. The premise is simple: navigate *Antichamber*'s maze following (or rather deciphering) the instructions that appear before each puzzle section. Mounted on walls and consisting of a (usually analogous) diagram and some cryptic text, *Antichamber*'s hints cunningly masquerade as part of the puzzle itself. Though the tasks themselves are mostly linear, you have the option of hopping between chambers, opening multiple areas of the unified gameworld at will. A tap of the escape key allows you to reset a chamber by seamlessly ejecting you to the game's black-and-white hub, which consists of three interactive walls (hosting game settings,



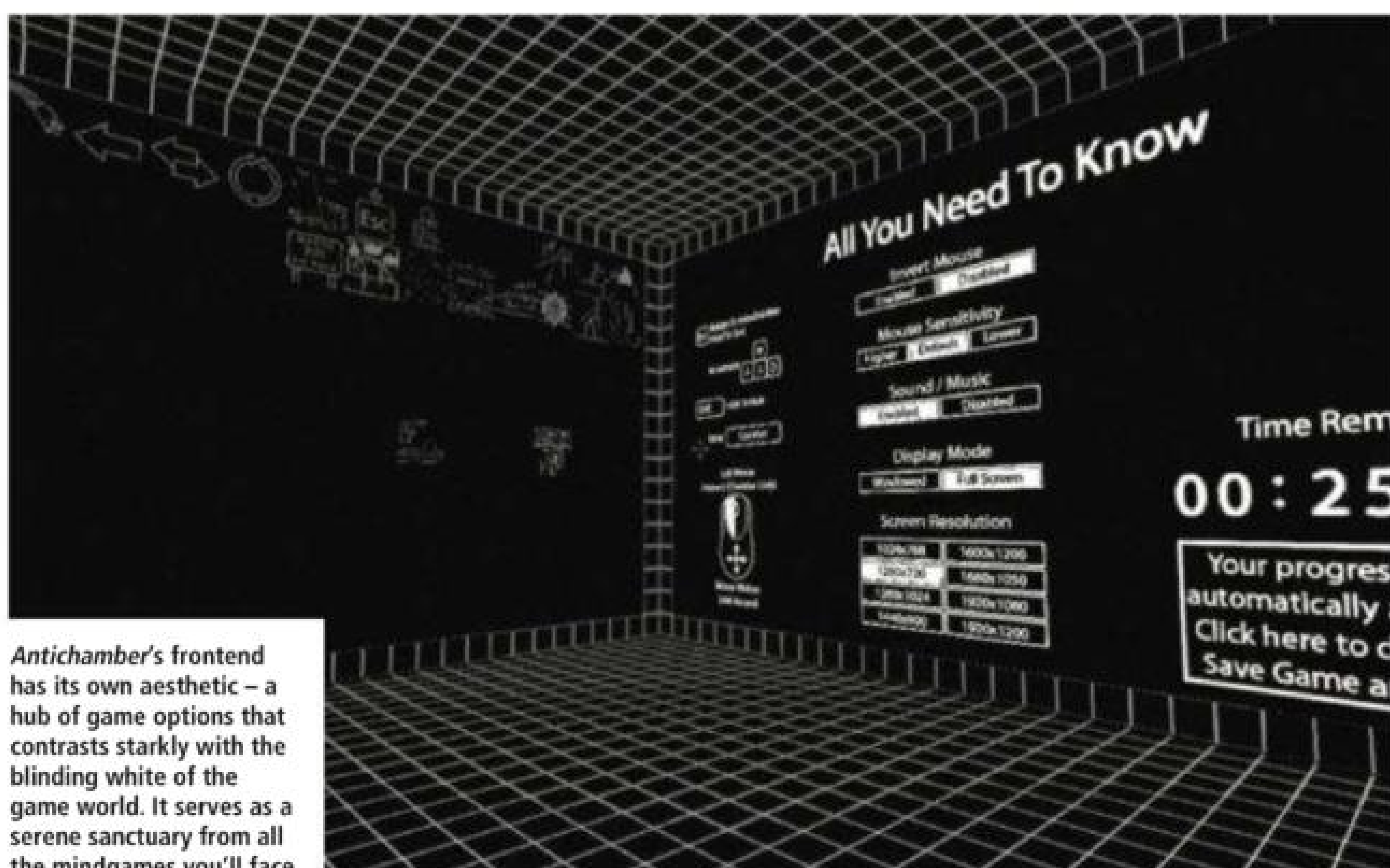


A nuanced soundscape punctuates the experience. The ambient sounds and jarring mix of earthy noises – from waterfalls to birds tweeting – hint at a world beyond your journey through the labyrinth

a map and the wall-mounted images/text you've come across so far), with a fourth side looking out on one of the game's corridors. It's a simplistic, striking fusion of menu and gameworld.

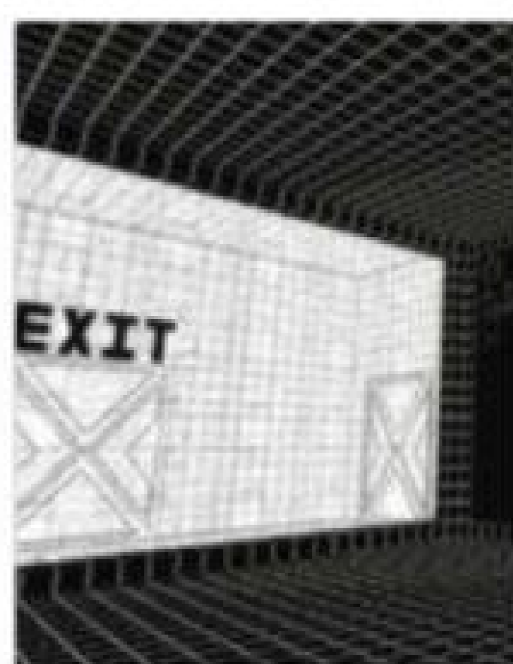
A 'gun', if you can call the device that, is introduced a few puzzles into the game and allows you to pick up and place small cubes – the game's keys and primary tools – on any surface. You'll use cubes frequently: as stepping stones to hop over walls, say, or as door-stops. They're an odd spin on a simple, everyday form factor; a metaphor, if we were to take Bruce's philosophical eye on things, for the game's own skewing of conventions.

Antichamber plays heavily with perspective. One puzzle forces you to intentionally look away from your destination so as to keep a door open, while another has you transforming your surroundings by staring into windows of colour, consequently changing the room you're in. The idea, Bruce explains, is to challenge players' preconceptions. "Most of the gameplay in *Antichamber* involves throwing scenarios at the player that go against everything they've come to understand from conventional games to see how they deal with the situation," he says. "I wouldn't say that any of the challenges are particularly difficult, as far as what the player has to do to overcome them. They're only difficult because they're designed to constantly work against what the player expects. First, it's toying with their expectations of how the game should work based on other games, and then it starts toying with their expectations based on what they've had to do in the game previously."



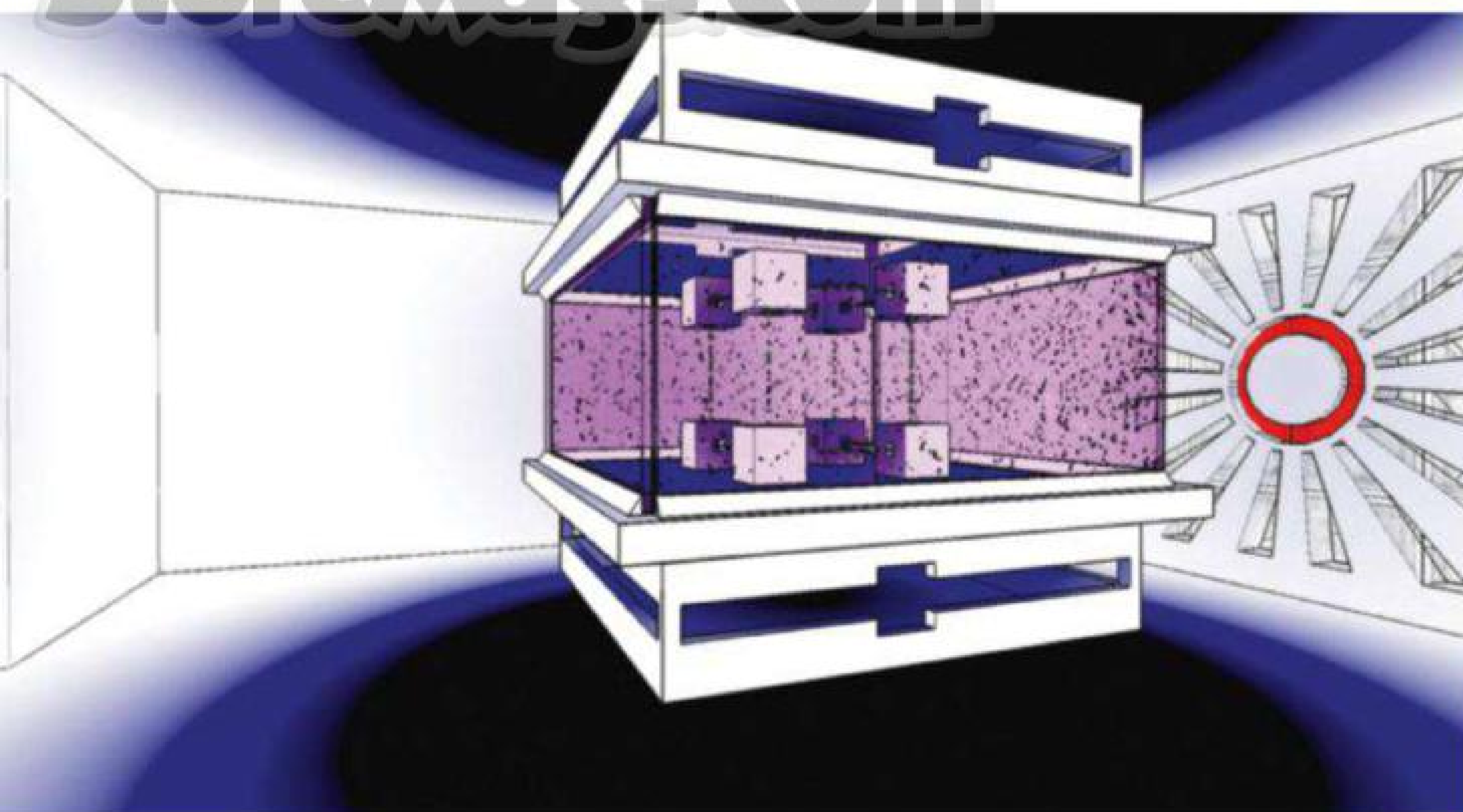
***Antichamber*'s frontend has its own aesthetic – a hub of game options that contrasts starkly with the blinding white of the game world. It serves as a serene sanctuary from all the mindgames you'll face**

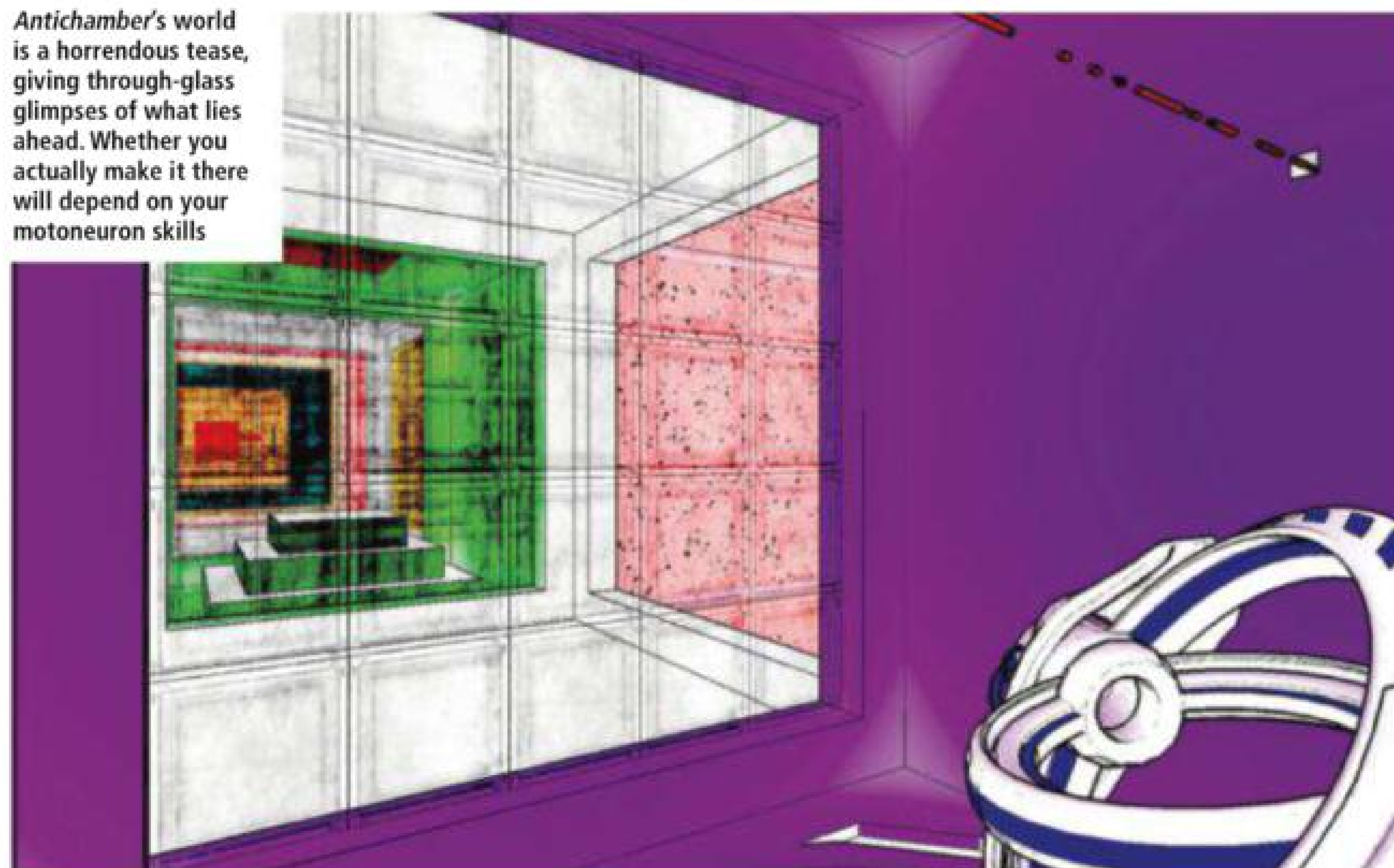
Perspective, of course, is crucial to much of Escher's work, but the splashes of block colour also bring to mind the likes of last year's seminal Move title *Echochrome II* (another game that took inspiration from the 20th-century artist and played with space and point of view). Then, of course, there's the obvious comparison to Valve's puzzle-room opus, *Portal*. Bruce prefers to discuss the visual design of the game in terms of its relevancy to the experience rather than its similarity to any other titles, however: "The world itself is so minimal because once you start messing around with the player's head you very quickly discover how important it is to remove anything that could distract [them]. For quite a long time, people kept looking at bugs in the game and thinking they were puzzles, or solving puzzles and thinking they'd broken the game. It's pretty difficult



Antechamber

The game's title derives from the term ante-room, meaning 'room before'. The term is often applied to theme parks, where an antechamber is used to inform visitors of the rules of the ride. There are many ways to read this meaning into the game, built as it is of rooms leading into other rooms and filled with instructional text and images. *Antichamber* is a series of waiting rooms leading on to the next challenge, each preparing you by challenging your understanding of the gameworld's rules. Each of the game's instructional texts and images are gathered in the black-and-white hub, accessed with a tap of the escape key.





Antichamber's world is a horrendous tease, giving through-glass glimpses of what lies ahead. Whether you actually make it there will depend on your motoneuron skills

to make a game like this feel right without running into either of those problems."

As we delve deeper into *Antichamber*, from leaps of faith from neck-breaking heights to revisiting areas that have warped into new spaces since our previous visit, there are moments where frustration creeps into its cerebral challenges. The enigmatic messages littering the halls can confuse as often as clarify. But the game's difficulty usually rests with your own lack of interpretative skills rather than any botched design. The game therefore plays particularly well with company, even though there are no multiplayer modes – a fresh set of eyes and ears to absorb the clues can help hugely. To broaden the game's appeal, it would benefit from a more user-friendly hint system, but then that would also neuter the sense of bewilderment Bruce hopes to instil.

If the game enters the retail space (it's currently planned for PC download only, although the possibility of home console versions hasn't been ruled out), one issue facing *Antichamber* is replay value. Once you've successfully unlocked the secret to a section, it can be unappealing to do so again, with the endorphin rush of uncovering a gameplay twist depleted.

If *Antichamber*'s visual hook and sensibility – rewarding brain rather than gun power – suggest it's part of the emergent *Portal* me-too movement, think again: this is a project with its own distinct flavour, one as finely crafted and varied in its puzzles as it is gloriously unbounded in its avant garde artistic flair. If *Antichamber*'s tightrope walk between confusion and innovation can live up to its bedroom coder's grand ambition, it could be another indie success story. ■

Q&A
Alexander Bruce
Indie developer



Which games influenced the development of *Antichamber*?
One of my favourite game series is *Metroid* for how it deals with exploration, and I think there have been some pretty strong influences from that throughout the game. The early phases of the game feel much more like *Braid* or *Portal*, because of their exploration of unusual mechanics, but as the game keeps getting deeper it becomes much more about using new tools to overcome previous challenges in the environment.

In general, the games that interest me the most are the ones that solved a problem that didn't exist before they were created. So with games like *Braid*, *Portal*, *Fez* and *Miegakure*, they started with interesting questions about time, navigation, perception or 4D space, and then answered them as completely as they could. I started with questions about mutable geometry and non-Euclidean space, and in the process of finding answers as to why they were interesting concepts, ended up addressing the even more interesting ideas of psychology and expectations within modern games.

Although it's abstract in its delivery, there does seem to be a narrative thread related to a relationship in the game. Can you tell us more about this element?
Antichamber is a game about coming to terms with a world that you don't fully understand. I guess you could say it's about growing up as well, because at the same time that the game was being developed, I was trying to work out what the hell I was doing on a personal level as well. I've been on a bit of an emotional rollercoaster throughout the development, and have had to change course several times.

How did you focus-test the game? Since you're the sole designer, was it all done purely through feedback at festivals and conferences?
Festivals and conferences are never the best environments for people to play a game in, but the reason that method worked so well for me was because it ensured that the moment-to-moment gameplay was consistently holding the player's interest. If you can have someone sit down at a busy event and play for an hour and a half, despite all of the distractions going on around them, it becomes pretty clear that things are working.

I've spent quite a lot of time and money testing the game by travelling around the world with it, but I view it all as a pretty worthwhile investment.



RIGHT **Although limbs remain attached to bodies and heads don't fly off shoulders, Team Ninja has by no means held back from delivering buckets of blood throughout *Ninja Gaiden 3*. Swords get jammed partway through opponents' torsos and the sound design rams home some stomach-churning squelches and cries**

BELOW **Hayabusa's new nemesis evokes an Illuminati leader rather than anything of eastern origin, a reminder that Team Ninja is shooting for wider appeal with its first Itagaki-free series entry**







HYPE

NINJA GAIDEN 3

Have Itagaki's students become masters?

Publisher	Tecmo Koei
Developer	Team Ninja
Format	360, PS3
Origin	Japan
Release	March



www.bit.ly/wCSw4E
Screenshot gallery

Combat is both fast and aggressive, so it's a shame that it's slowed by the designer's theatrical tastes, with a lurching, disorienting camera

When we previously drew blood in *Ninja Gaiden 3* (**E**234), we took a stab at a portion of the opening London-set chapter. Back then, Team Ninja's new boss, Yosuke Hayashi, seemed to be steering the series toward relentless QTEs and arcade-style accessibility. While a complete run-through of the level reinforces the notion that this is *Ninja Gaiden* gone casual, it's the second stage – set in a Middle-Eastern desert city – that honours the hardcore philosophy of Hayashi's mentor, Tomonobu Itagaki.

In its final form, then, and with book-ending cutscenes in place to offer some exposition, the opening section feels like an introduction to Ryu Hayabusa for the uninitiated, with the ninja/bodybuilder now a god among men, as opposed to a god among demons. Meanwhile, the plot – Hayabusa is called on to eliminate a shadowy group of terrorists in a globe-trotting yarn – draws on blockbuster films as opposed to eastern myth. But in Team Ninja's bid to cater to a western palate, it seems it has removed much of the series' supernatural allure, replacing it with action movie staples. Though Ayane does make an early, fleeting cameo, it's unclear how firmly *Ninja Gaiden 3* will stay rooted to its past, and whether the writers and designers have the chops (or desire) to match the beasts and beauty of Itagaki's legacy.

The action-flick riff flows into the start of the second stage, when Hayabusa is imparted the crossbow by his governmental minders, establishing a James Bond's Q-esque dynamic that rings hollow for a character who's always been an army of one. It's also jarring but pleasing to find the second chapter so divergent in challenge and style to the first. There are fewer scripted events, more worthy opponents, and bright, uncluttered spaces in which to carve up your foes. It's a direct contrast to the linear-yet-confusing London streets, where a hurdle to slide under or wall to awkwardly scale lurks behind every corner.

Though there are fewer set-piece QTE moments in the second chapter, button prompts remain a cornerstone of combat. You can remove the prompts in the settings, but the pauses and erratic camera moves remain constant. Even easy grunt kills are slowed down, zooming the camera in to emphasise the result of steel slicing skin. The slick camera proves disorienting, however. It's forgivable in a one-on-one skirmish, but infuriating when you're outnumbered.

Initially, this cinematic approach feels like a guiding hand from the designers, a way to sidestep some of the blind-spot issues that plague other action games, but it soon becomes tiresome. Persevere and dice enough enemies, however, and you're granted a special attack. Holding down triangle initiates a three-man killing spree that sets Hayabusa's blade on a seemingly random trio of opponents. This further complicates any attempt at strategy, seeing you dragged from foe to foe and unable to steer the flow of the action. It's cinematic, but disengaging.

Though such mechanics obscure the simple joys of painting the town red, Team Ninja has made some fine revisions to the *Ninja Gaiden* formula. Arrows can be fired more accurately in midair and orbs no longer flutter about the screen (though the Ki meter builds with each kill and counter as always).

For better or worse, the *Ninja Gaiden* mould has been shaken up, but there are signs that the team isn't entirely betraying its legacy. If the finished product builds, level to level, as these initial chapters do – from mundane to challenging – *Ninja Gaiden 3* could yet carve up the competition. ■



Move over

PlayStation Move controls once again prove a lacklustre alternative for anyone looking for fresh ways to play. Simply waggling the controller lunges Hayabusa into his flurries of attack, neutering any sense of achievement, and lacking both precision and challenge. Nintendo recently showed how to build a game around motion controls with *Skyward Sword*, so it's a shame Team Ninja hasn't capitalised on the Move controller's responsiveness and potential to serve Hayabusa's slicing and dicing. In this case, Move compatibility feels more like a marketing bullet point than a thoughtful design decision.

H | Y
P | E

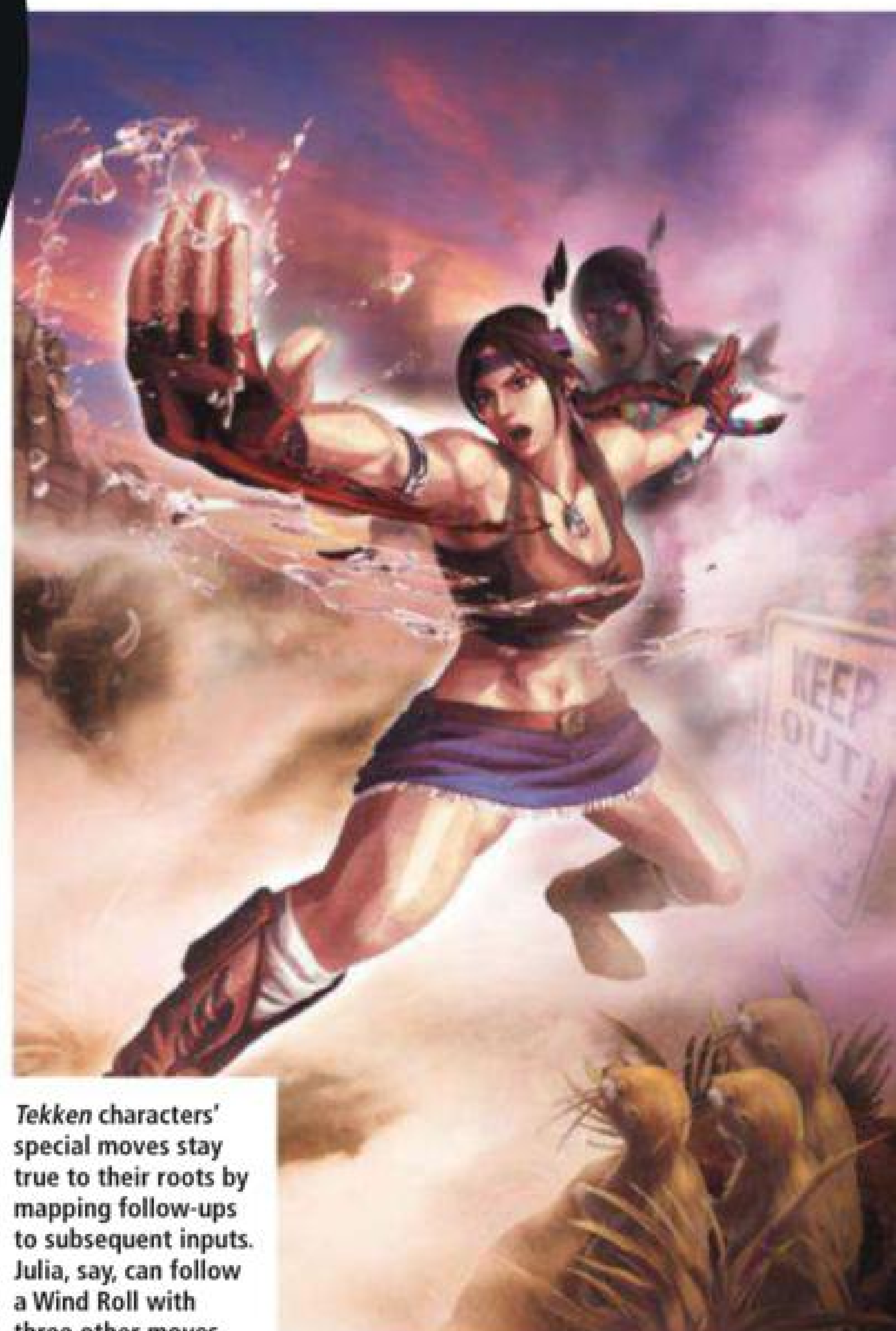
STREET FIGHTER X TEKKEN

Poised to be the king of crossovers – if Capcom gets the balance right

Publisher	Capcom
Developer	In-house
Format	360, PS3, PC, Vita
Origin	Japan
Release	March







Tekken **characters' special moves stay true to their roots by mapping follow-ups to subsequent inputs. Julia, say, can follow a Wind Roll with three other moves**

ABOVE **Paul Phoenix has been hardest hit by the transition from 3D to *SFXT's* comic-book style, his build presumably over-emphasised to set him apart from *Street Fighter* counterpart Ken Masters.**
RIGHT **While *Street Fighter* veterans often associate the dragon punch with the end of a combo, here it's just the beginning. Tag in a partner by pressing both medium attacks and the combo can continue**





www.bit.ly/zNZoQG
Art and screenshot gallery

Stages change over the course of a match, with fighters sometimes jumping to lower levels for different backgrounds. By the final round, this level is illuminated by the neon-rigged trucks

One year on from our first look at Capcom's once-unthinkable crossover between two of the most revered fighting game series in history, the company's gradual drip of announcements has left us with a roster of 35 characters, though rumours indicate that the final count may well be nearer 50. While there's time for it to change, then, the current impression is that this might as well have been called *Street Fighter IV X Tekken*: on the Capcom side, just three of the 18 confirmed fighters are absent from the *SFIV* roster. It's little surprise given that the game runs in the same engine, but long-standing series fans might feel entitled to a wider representation of its 25-year history than *Street Fighter III*'s Hugo and Poison, and Rolento from *Alpha 2*.

Few of the most recent *Tekken* side announcements raised eyebrows: series stalwarts Paul Phoenix and Marshall Law were such obvious inclusions that they might as well have been announced alongside the game at Comic-Con 2010. Capcom has mere weeks to announce the remainder of the roster, and the safe money's on *Tekken*'s Jack and *Street Fighter*'s Akuma, with a recent trailer revealing Mega Man and, bizarrely, Pac-Man. They, like *Infamous* protagonist Cole McGrath and Sony Japan mascots Toro and Kuro, will be exclusive to Sony platforms.

The Capcom characters are largely unchanged from their *Street Fighter IV* incarnations, a logical consequence both of the desire to ensure *SFIV* players make the switch and of the amount of work required to fit characters from a 3D brawler in a 2D setting. Capcom appears to have struck a fine balance, ensuring the *Tekken* cast fit the *Street Fighter* style while still feeling like themselves.

Producer Yoshinori Ono wants to expand the fighting game's audience, which means a host of mechanics aimed at new players that will also help *Tekken* players make the switch. There are two simplified control schemes: one aimed at beginners, with special moves mapped to single directions, and one based on *Tekken*'s directional taps, with diagonal inputs removed. Both mean lower damage output and a reduced moveset, but beginners can start out with controls they feel comfortable with and gradually work their way up to the regular control scheme.

Then there's the gem system, which when first announced seemed like a way of racking up preorders; different retailers will offer different gems, with a purchase of the special edition the only way to guarantee the full set on launch day. Players choose five gems before the match begins, and they're split into two categories: boost and assist. The former gives experienced players increased speed, health or damage, while the latter is aimed at beginners, automatically blocking attacks or teching throws. Boost gems have to be activated by meeting certain conditions during a round, and assists come at a cost: using auto-block depletes your Cross Gauge by a third.

It's still a concern, particularly given that you're not told which gems your opponent is using, and with 55 to choose from, there's a risk of something game-breaking being found once they're in the hands of millions. But *Street Fighter X Tekken* feels wonderful, a faster-paced, more attack-minded game than *Street Fighter IV*, with intriguing possibilities in its tag-heavy combo system and its concessions to newcomers well thought out and balanced. *Street Fighter IV* catapulted fighting games back into the mainstream, but favoured depth over accessibility. If Capcom can strike a balance between the two, it could be on to something truly special. ■



Crossover appeal

Series fans may remember *Street Fighter Alpha*'s Dramatic Battle, in which Ryu and Ken fought final boss M Bison simultaneously. *Street Fighter X Tekken* takes that engaging conflict a step further with Scramble, a fourplayer mode with all characters onscreen at once. It's chaotic stuff, of course, but there's clearly potential for creative, extensive combos. You can also team up in Paired Battle, which plays out like a normal fight, with each player controlling a single character. That's going to take more than a little bit of practice, so the inclusion of an online training mode is most welcome indeed.

Aerial combat has featured heavily in early looks at *Uprising*, but the transition between flying and on-foot sections seems to cleverly mesh with the weapons system, forcing you to pick arms carefully before levels

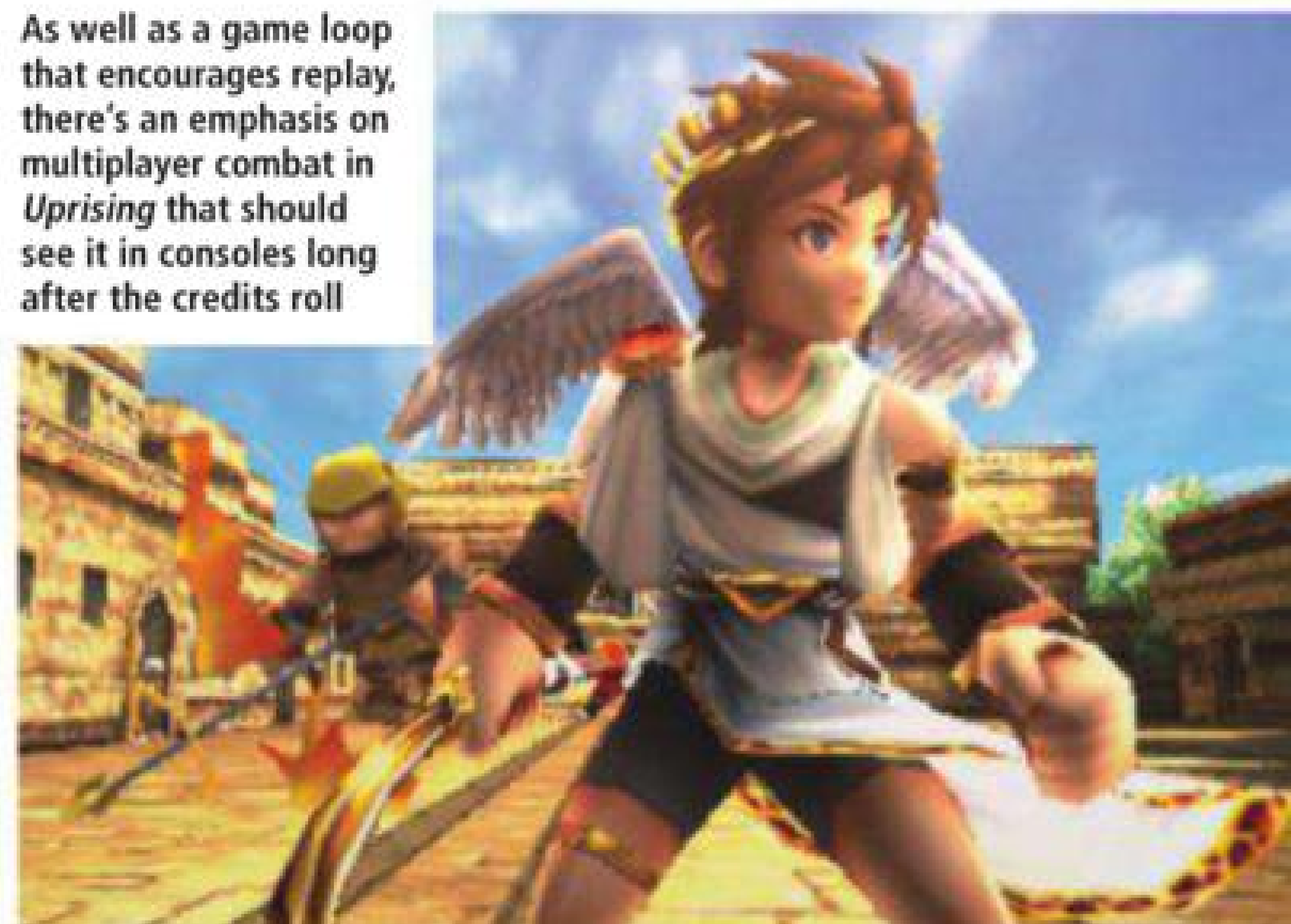






This three-headed dragon is Hewdraw, a boss that appears in chapter three. The order in which you defeat its first two heads changes the dialogue spouted by the last

As well as a game loop that encourages replay, there's an emphasis on multiplayer combat in *Uprising* that should see it in consoles long after the credits roll



HYPE

KID ICARUS: UPRISING

Nintendo's most cherubic character stars in a punishing shoot 'em up

Publisher	Nintendo
Developer	Project Sora
Format	3DS
Origin	Japan
Release	March





Medusa's hordes see Nintendo on impressive visual form, conjuring all sorts of bizarre beasts and homages to the NES title that gave life to Pit



Uprising not only comes with its own cast of eyeball-heavy goons to defeat, but you can expect to see cameos from the *Metroid* franchise make an appearance, too

For a game that presents itself as a Saturday morning cartoon, *Kid Icarus: Uprising* is an alarmingly hardcore shoot 'em up. It's at a stroke more challenging than the straightforward flag grabs of *Mario*'s primary-coloured platformer worlds, more consistently frenzied than anything Samus Aran would encounter, and a far cry from the relative placidity of Link's usual haunts. Yes, Nintendo has found a new and gruelling niche in which to place one of its most malleable and least recognisable icons. Pit, it has decided, is the Nintendo character who'll reduce you to a shrivelled, defeated mess.

Uprising is designed to be replayed, with each chapter goading you into gambling your accumulated score against a chosen difficulty level. These chapters are split into an initial *Sin And Punishment*-style on-rails shooter section, before culminating in an on-foot, free-roaming action runabout. The former is a sort of *After-Burner*-meets-Greek-mythology affair, with Pit screaming through luscious, rolling cloudscapes and soaring his way over beautifully rendered, scorched battlefields. The latter is in thirdperson beat 'em up form, with full camera control handed to the player and a more varied and tactical array of combat options.

Your choice of weapon, from one of nine basic categories, dictates how these two sections play out. Head into the on-rails flying sections wielding the melee-centric club and you'll find yourself at a disadvantage. Once on the ground, however, the club's ability to clobber with extreme prejudice comes into its own. Within the nine basic categories exist dozens of different individual weapons. The gunblade category, for example, hosts the light and agile samurai blade, the multi-shot-firing burst blade and the poisonous viper blade, each carrying a unique aesthetic and bespoke animations. Weapons are bought and sold, as well as discovered inside well-guarded chests, and it's the rarity of those powerful weapons that drives the game's replay value.

Pit is the Nintendo character who'll reduce you to a shrivelled, defeated mess

Uprising's cast is one of Nintendo's most bizarre. A Groucho Marx face that shoots bombs from its nostrils sits alongside a three-tiered scallop tea tray with orbiting, laser-firing pearls. It's HR Giger meets CBeebies and it's fascinating just to see what oddness is thrown at you next. Most chapters conclude with weird bosses, such as the three-headed Hewdraw, whose personality changes based on which heads you lop off.

Gambling more hearts at a chapter's outset increases your ability to procure better weapons. A sliding difficulty scale allows you to set your challenge level. Go low and you're effectively paying hearts for an easier ride. Go high and you're risking your hearts for bigger jackpots. Failure drops the difficulty level and loses you a chunk of the pot.

The highest difficulty setting demands supernatural reaction times, too. It's mind-smearingly difficult: with the top screen a masochistic, bullet-hell mess, we haven't yet lasted 30 seconds. There's real lasting challenge for all skill levels and increasing rewards for playing right on the edge of your comfort level.

There are still issues with *Uprising*'s control system, specifically during the on-foot sections, where the touchscreen is used to rotate the camera around Pit. The method is unintuitive, requiring a few hours' play before it feels natural. Once you've mastered them, though, *Uprising*'s controls are remarkably swift and precise, and feel entirely appropriate for the acrobatic Pit.

It's ironic that Nintendo has placed its most innocent and cherubic star in a game so punishing in its arcane control method and relentlessly spiralling difficulty. Whatever mystical force inspired Pit's re-emergence, he's carried with him a daunting whiff of old-school challenge, a gruelling sort of stuffy retro miasma. You can soar through the game if you like, but when it's finally released, *Uprising* will want to make you crawl. ■



Raising the barcode

Kid Icarus: Uprising will come furnished with a three-versus-three competitive multiplayer mode, as well as a free-for-all Battle Royale option. But perhaps more interesting is the game's integration of 3DS's augmented-reality capabilities. A number of character cards will be made available (Nintendo hasn't yet made clear how), which, when placed next to each other on a flat surface, will produce 3D models of in-game characters, which will then proceed to brawl. Outcomes to these scraps appear pre-canned, but it will at least help settle playground disputes over whether angel Pit is tougher than goddess Palutena.

H | Y
P | E

DIRT SHOWDOWN

Codemasters' renowned series spins off into full-contact territory



Publisher	Codemasters
Developer	In-house
Format	360, PC, PS3
Origin	UK
Release	May





Showdown's events take place against a wide range of weather effects. The loss of grip in snowy environments adds to the mayhem of demolition derbies



Every event in *Showdown* is designed to be just that: an event. Look beyond the foreground's sparking metal and flying debris and you'll see cruise liners and big wheels shimmering in the distance, as schools of circling paragliders enjoy views of the auto carnage unfolding below them

Grid racers should be familiar with the Yokohama Docks. They feature in *Showdown* as the home of a Gymkhana arena three times larger than *Dirt 3*'s Battersea power station

With the exception of zombie party cars and the luminous polystyrene blocks designed purely for extravagant obliteration in *Dirt 2*'s Gatecrasher and *Dirt 3*'s Gymkhana modes, *Dirt* is a series predicated on a strict non-contact rule set. For all the franchise's recent 'extreme' inclusions, Codemasters has never strayed from the clean race ideology established in 1998's *Colin McRae Rally*; merely grazing a wooden post at high speeds can all too often throw a vehicle into a catastrophic tailspin. Frenzied sideswipes in head-to-head battles by autoists with fantasies of *Burnout*'s signature takedowns, meanwhile, are as likely to retire the aggressor as they are the victim, second chances granted by rewind tool Flashback notwithstanding.

But comprehensive data-mining of *Dirt 3*'s user-progress statistics has helped Codemasters discover untapped potential in *Dirt*'s worn tyre treads: an audience content to play with nothing but the easiest settings, who feel most at home in the busier, multi-car game types. As the cries for more demanding rallying ramped up online during *Dirt 3*'s qualifying days, players voted in a different manner in-game.

To purify these muddied waters, *Dirt* has now been cleft in two. *Dirt 3*'s true successor will make a pit stop to siphon off those features deemed too indulgent, before driving back down the rallying path of its ancestors. That leaves the *Showdown* series as the new vehicle for the discarded modes as well as a test track for other luxuries.

One thing clearly missing from *Showdown*'s blueprints is any mention of contact-free racing, as evidenced in a hectic eight-buggy Baja sprint around a dusty desert circuit. Gone is the need to gently feather the throttle to ease 1,300kg of angry car around corners. In *Showdown* the tyres bite with extra vigour to take turns with *Ridge Racer* flamboyance, but if the engine has been overcooked prior to a hairpin you can use an opponent's side as a kicker to negotiate the bend safely. Motorised bushwhacking is positively encouraged.

Mounds of tyres, deadly impediments in *Dirt 3*, are now strewn about the racetrack along with boxes and barrels with almost careless abandon. All are begging to be scattered by a speeding bumper.

Showdown's excessive pageantry wouldn't be complete without the obligatory boost button synonymous with the underground scene of The Fast And The Furious generation. Here it sits snugly within a relaxed control system where drifting is easy to initiate and maintain, and in race modes where performance is judged on aggression as much as it is on composure.

These rubble-strewn jostles to the finishing post come in familiar elimination, domination and standard flavours, yet make up just the quietest third of *Dirt Showdown*'s three-pronged assault on motorised mayhem. The other two keystones of *Showdown*'s curriculum vitae are its Hoonigan and demolition derby events, the first an expanded take on Gymkhana with multi-car stunt challenges, the second a respectful nod back to Reflections' *Destruction Derby* brand.

Whatever your take on *Dirt*'s recent destinations, the unexpected diversion along the highway to *Grid 2* should be heralded with the carnival spirit depicted in its frenzied events: it's either the game that promises to bring years of childhood Hot Wheels play sessions to life, or the filter through which all of *Dirt*'s garish events have been extracted. Like or loathe the style, the Codemasters garage knows how to tune up a fine racer. ■



From the hearse's mouth

Dirt has never been a series to shy away from vehicular carnage, but events such as demolition derbies have seen safety belts unclipped and the full force of the EGO engine's damage system let loose for the first time. It's possible for cars to be ripped clean in two (then pieced back together courtesy of the renamed Crashback reverse button), a feature that has forced Codemasters to ease back on officially licensed vehicles in favour of bespoke varieties. Hearses are promised, but for reasons no more sinister than providing peculiar frameworks to be fed through the physics wringer – *FlatOut 2*-style ragdoll drivers are a no-no.

ARM
Cortex
A9 core four
core CPU Full
SGX543MP4+ GPU
Five-inch (16:9) 960x54
OLED multitouch scr
Rear touchpad Fro
cameras Microp
motion sen
electron
Du



Sony's Vita packs together some of the best features of portable consoles and smartphones, but is the company ready to embrace the era of the app?

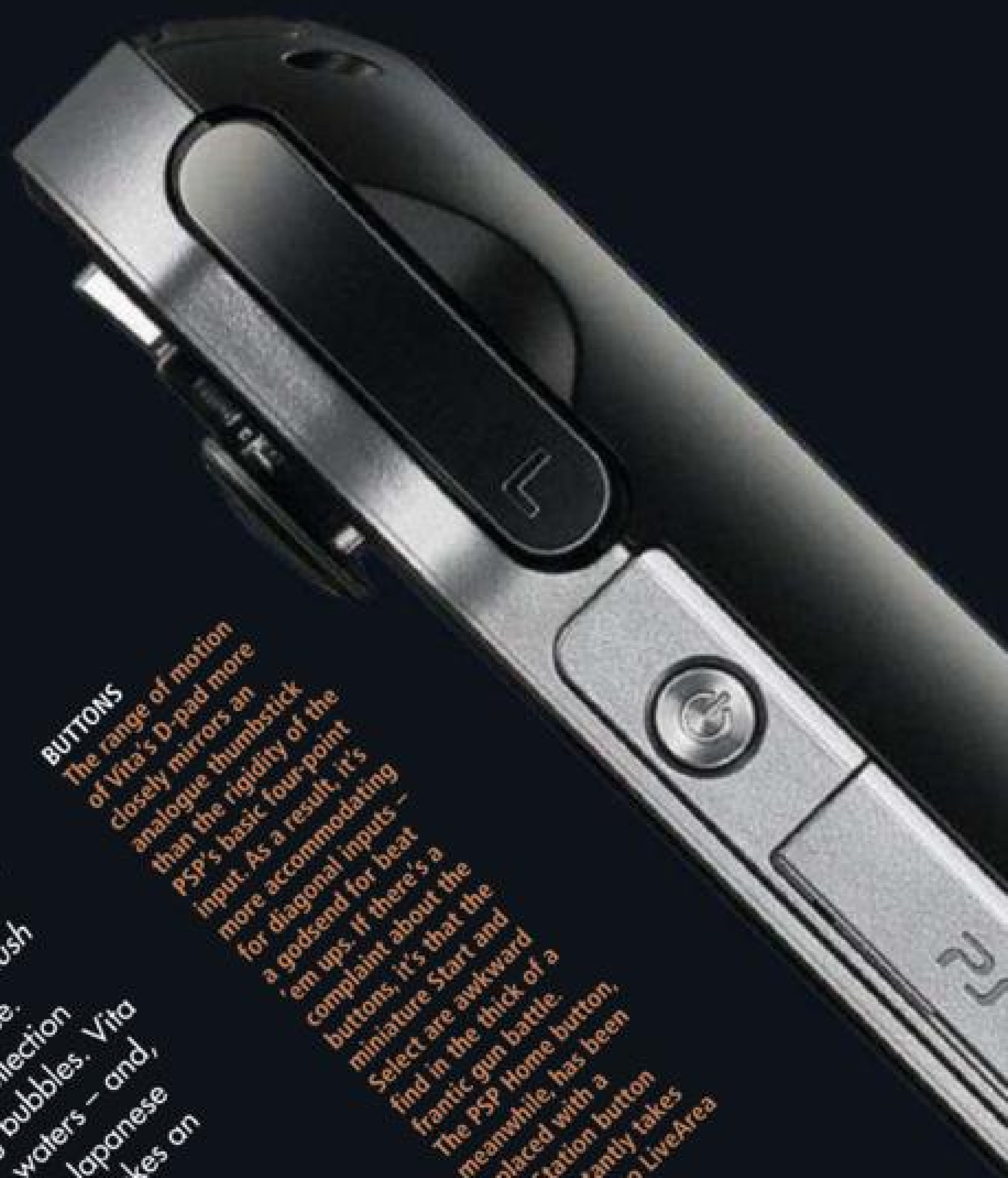


n paper, it's incoherent: a bewildering congregation of inputs and delivery methods that should struggle to come together with any grace. Look at the specifications: Sony's new handheld has game cards, memory cards and a digital store. It has two touchpads, thumbsticks, a gyroscope, an accelerometer, a microphone and cameras.

The biggest surprise about Vita is how natural all of this feels when it's resting in your hands, and how harmoniously its weird array of features slot into place. Sony's skill at designing luxurious, aspirational products has resulted in an elegant slice of hard plastic that's equally at home mimicking glass or brushed metal, while early titles such as *Uncharted: Golden Abyss* and *Gravity Rush* use touchscreen, motion and button inputs with ease. Elsewhere, the LiveArea UI draws your game collection together into a friendly cluster of shimmering bubbles. Vita hasn't been launched into particularly calm waters – and, with no *Monster Hunter* to back it up, its early Japanese sales figures hardly inspire confidence – but it makes an assured first impression all the same.

For starters, the hardware feels plush and reliable, with only the rubbery hinges of the card slots hinting that one eye was on budget during development. Vita is slightly larger than PSP, but it fits your hands much more comfortably. And with no UMD drive chattering away inside, it feels less fragile, too. Once again, the screen is king. Vita's five-inch OLED display is bright, sharp, and free from the afterimages that plagued so many PSP games. While it's not quite Retina display resolution, it also has four times as many pixels as its older sibling.

In fact, Vita has clearly learned much from its predecessor. It has two thumbsticks rather than a single analogue nub, PSP's flimsy power slider is gone in favour of a metallic stud, and the battery is no longer removable – a change in policy that's annoying for consumers, but may circumvent many of PSP's problems with hacking. Crucially, there's a sense that Sony's learned from PSP's hubris, too. There's no talk of this being the Walkman of the



BUTTONS
The range of motion of Vita's D-pad more closely mirrors an analogue thumbstick than the rigidity of the PSP's basic four-point input. As a result, it's more accommodating for diagonal inputs – a godsend for beat 'em ups. If there's a complaint about the buttons, it's that the miniature Start and Select are awkward to find in the thick of a frantic gun battle. The PSP Home button, meanwhile, has been replaced with a PlayStation button that instantly takes you back to LiveArea



SCREEN
The five-inch OLED screen is a 16:9 widescreen display that raises the bar for handheld consoles. The best early showings of its potential come from the Sony stable, with *Wipeout 2048* and *Uncharted: Golden Abyss* leading the pixel-powered charge. Equally attractive are games such as *Frobisher Says*, that make inventive use of Vita's touchscreen

21st century – despite the close involvement of Walkman designer Tokashi Sogabe – and the Vita cards housing its games aren't billed as a revolution in multimedia storage. PSP's big gamble was trying to do a bit of everything. Vita's a roundly capable device, but it's clearly putting games back at the centre of the experience. In 2012, such a purity of purpose feels refreshingly bold.

That's not to say Sony hasn't been keeping track of smartphone trends. Vita's screen offers multitouch control that feels every bit as responsive as an iPhone's, even if the surface texture creates a bit more friction under your finger and seems to hold greasy smudges a little longer. LiveArea, meanwhile, borrows its springy, playful physics from iOS and displays apps (they're not called games any more) as a series of plasticky bubbles. LiveArea is built around touch, too, with vertical strokes moving you through pages of apps, and a swipe to the right – or a press of the PlayStation button – bringing up all the software that's currently running. You can then either leap into that software with a jab, or peel it from the screen to deactivate it, a process that soon becomes second nature. Like an iPhone, Vita also saves in-game progress the moment you close an app or put the device to sleep, and it's surprisingly quick to restart.

> When it comes to gaming, Vita's capable of the kind of feats Apple and Android users can only dream of

Vita's onboard software ranges from the genuinely useful to the pleasantly experimental. Alongside audio and video players, you'll find a content manager for the transfer of files between your Vita and a PS3 or a PC, plus Near, a location-based social network that keeps track of your activities and any other Vitas you might come across. Multitasking capabilities mean that you can have friends lists, messaging, and cross-title chat running in the background while you dive into a game, and the only real disappointment comes in the form of the Web browser, which is slow to start, awkward to use and apparently incapable of resizing columns of text when you zoom in.

The UI may have been influenced by the current generation of smartphones, but when it comes to gaming Vita is capable of the kind of feats that Apple and Android users can only dream of. It's not a question of power, even though the console's quad-core processor can deliver graphics that come close to matching the kind of visuals you'll see on a PS3 – albeit with less elaborate effects, and fewer onscreen elements. Character models are

DRAWING YOU NEAR

One of Vita's more intriguing applications is Near, an odd strain of social network that allows you to keep track of your movements with your console, while also connecting you with other Vita owners you might encounter on your travels. At the very least, it's an interesting way of broadening your friends list as you scan your neighbours and check out their Trophy progress, and there's a limited range of interactions permitted, too. Near has clearly been designed with Japan's urban centres in mind, but – much like Nintendo's SpotPass – it will also allow armchair analysts to get a loose sense of the uptake of Sony's new hardware.

MEMORY CARD SLOT It's the plastic-and-rubber memory slot cover that hampers Vita's expensive feel, and it requires a thin, pointy object to pop open. It's concealed well, though, and with Sony's commitment to downloadable software and storage, it's likely the part of the machine you'll have the least regular contact with. It's also less flimsy than a UMD tray's metal brackets

detailed, environments are roomy and complex, but there's still relatively little an iPad 2 couldn't rival. It's the wide array of inputs that distinguishes Vita from the pack.

In a touchscreen era, Sony's commitment to buttons is laudable. The shoulder triggers feel more sensitive than PSP's equivalents, and appear to be hinged in the centre, meaning that you can push them inwards from either end. Meanwhile, the D-pad and face buttons have a satisfying click to them, while the twin thumbsticks are easier to use than the nub of yore, despite lacking a little resistance. If you're after a crucial addition that separates Vita from its competitors, these sticks fit that description. You'll need to give yourself a period to adjust to the increased sensitivity that seems to come with their diminished size, but they'll feel indispensable after ten minutes of playing *Golden Abyss* or *Super Stardust Delta*, even if their placement does mean you're going to end up shading the stereo speakers with your thumbs whenever you're using them.

Tilt control, meanwhile, is sensitive enough for games such as *Gravity Rush* to incorporate it into their aiming mechanics without it becoming annoying, and although the unit's front- and rear-mounted cameras may not be particularly powerful – offering a pretty meagre 1.3 megapixels – they do provide decent support for Vita's augmented-reality capabilities. The final piece of the puzzle is the touchpad on the rear of the machine, which remains something of an unknown quantity. The current crop of Vita games tend to employ it as a gimmick, and while the hardware itself is clearly responsive, it will make you feel rather clumsy the first few times you use it.

Vita's wealth of input options come together to form a gaming machine that bubbles with creative potential. That said, with its protruding sticks and shiny surface, Sony's handheld is perhaps a little too delicate and cumbersome to slip into a backpack or pull out on the Tube. It's a portable device you may be anxious about actually carrying around. The glinting screen makes it difficult to use in direct sunlight, while its battery life ranges from just over three hours with Wi-Fi, 3G and a game such as

Vita's wealth of inputs come together to form a machine that bubbles with creative potential

REAR TOUCHPAD
Though *Little Deviants* (reviewed on p124) hasn't proved to be the demonstration of rear-touch potential that early previews suggested, Vita's rear touchpad is still an intriguing proposition for developers willing to experiment in uncharted waters. While certain launch games have deigned to use rear-touch only to map traditional inputs – *Stardust* with bombs and *Wipeout* with acceleration, for example – it'll be interesting to see what adventurous developers get up to with the hardware in the coming months

CAMERAS
At 1.3 megapixels, Vita's cameras aren't going to be putting your smartphone to shame any time soon, but they are a platform for Sony's augmented-reality ambitions. Vita comes bundled with AR cards in the box and the tech is put to use in *Reality Fighters* (reviewed on p124)

Wipeout, up to around five hours if you opt for less power-hungry usage. (It holds its charge astonishingly well in standby mode, however.)

Such issues hint at a nagging sense of confusion somewhere within the central concept. Sony's been so successful at bringing DualShock controls to life on a handheld that it's now hard to know what a Vita game is meant to be. If Vita's a device for home console experiences, the hardware and its intended use may often find themselves at cross purposes. *Uncharted: Golden Abyss* looks the part of a PS3 blockbuster, for example, but its structure apes a miniseries rather than a film, with shorter chapters giving the adventure an uneven pace. *Wipeout 2048* raises some issues of its own, offering a level of graphical detailing that Vita obviously has no problem conjuring up, but overwhelming your eyes when it throws too many colours on a display that's much closer than a living-room setup. Just because the device is capable of delivering fully realised console games, it doesn't mean they'll succeed without a little tinkering. On top of that, there's also the touchy subject of who is making these small-screen instalments of big-screen hits. Even with a device as powerful as Vita, there's a sense something like *Golden Abyss*, as with the *God Of War* PSP titles before it, may have ended up in the hands of a talented B-team.

If Vita's meant for smaller, more traditional mobile games, however, then the most significant hurdle to success may lie with the PSN store. While relatively unmuddled by PlayStation standards, it still offers considerably more friction than the one-touch purchasing of the App Store. Critically, it's still a walled garden. It's undeniably welcome to see bigger, more complex projects given room to breathe, but it also means that Sony has nothing to counter the endless churn of weird and wonderful new titles on iOS. Even counting PSP Minis, it has no real equivalent to the low-priced, low-risk impulse purchases that now define handheld gaming for millions of smartphone owners around the world. Whether you approach Vita as a developer or a player, it's a strategic blunder, and one that's compounded by the lack of internal memory (and the absence of the 32GB memory card in Europe).

When it comes to hardware, Vita is often astonishingly forward-thinking. It has a suite of input options that rivals the best that smartphones and traditional consoles have to offer, and it has the processing power to ensure its relevance for years to come. When you examine a few crucial elements of the software package, however – the browser, the all-important store, the defining characteristics of what a Vita game should look like – it's on less stable ground.

In other words, the quality and generosity of the design should give Vita a fighting chance, but its longterm success may ultimately hinge on how willing Sony is to embrace the new realities of the handheld landscape. ■

3G OR NOT 3G?

Much like an iPad, Vita's available in two flavours: 3G-enabled and Wi-Fi-only models. In terms of the former, Sony has already announced it has a 'preferred partnership' deal with Vodafone. The 3G Vita comes with a Vodafone SIM card included, and anyone who spends the extra £50 will be able to use apps such as Near, Party chat, and download ghost data for games like *Wipeout 2048* while on the move. It's worth remembering, however, that any downloads over 3G will be capped at 20MB, which rules out the option to buy full games without access to a Wi-Fi connection.

AUDIO

Since your thumbs will likely be muffling the stereo speakers as they waggle Vita's thumbsticks, it's fortunate that the headphone jack is well placed. But it's a crying shame that Sony chose not to include a set of high-end headphones with the hardware – it's certainly worth using a pair to get the most out of games such as *Golden Abyss* and *Wipeout*, whose high production values are as evident in the audio as the visuals



THE UNTOUCHABLES

Concluding our critical look at the stone-cold classics of gaming, stripping away the veneer of perfection to reveal the far more interesting truth beneath

Looking for a game's flaws, as we discovered in **E**237, can be a fine way of circling their achievements. Having already picked apart *Half-Life 2*, *Rez* and *Grim Fandango*, three more classics are now in the firing line. They are: *Halo*, the acceptable and universally acclaimed face of the space marine shooter; *Resident Evil 4*, arguably the finest, most meticulous and most generous thirdperson shooter to date; and *Super Mario Galaxy*, the true successor to the game that taught us how polygons should run and jump. Each is a masterwork and an inspiration to developers.

What all of these games have in common is that they know exactly what they're doing. Despite all the prototypes, delays and transformations they went through, their founding principles held firm. It's for this reason that these games, maybe even more than last month's, tell us as much about their parent companies' culture and values as they do their technology and craft. Their flaws, if you can call them that, exist at an almost genetic level. Strip them out and you risk losing a whole lot more than you might gain – a lesson that *Resident Evil 5* learned the hard way.



FALLEN ANGEL

Game Halo: Combat Evolved **Developer** Bungie **Format** 360, PC, Mac, Xbox **Original release** 2001

As veterans of *GoldenEye 007*, **David Doak** and his colleagues at Free Radical were among the few credible active makers of console FPS games when they first heard, via none other than former **Edge** editor Joao Diniz Sanches, that *Halo* was pretty good. This, in the context of all the hype, meant that it was terrific. Masterful, even.

"We were obviously very busy, but it was one of the few games I actually took the time to play back then," says Doak. "And I spent whatever it was, a Saturday and a Sunday, to play through it in a way you don't often do – and I really enjoyed it. But it's a mixed bag..."

He is the first to admit that the *TimeSplitters* franchise owes a few things to *Halo*: "*TimeSplitters 3* had the whole Flood thing going on, and we stole the weapon-overheating thing and the way the plasma grenade particle effect works." So Doak knows *Halo*'s core loop is strong, and credits its roots as a Mac realtime strategy game for its non-player-centric action, its AI and its openness, the latter of which feels fresh to this day.

"One of the things that's really interesting in *Halo*, compared to what's happened since, is that what you see going on is generally what's going on. There's not much smoke and mirrors: some ridiculous cutscene's playing just over there, which looks amazing, but you absolutely mustn't go over and have a look. Some of my strongest memories of playing *Halo* were being outside, running about, where I'd been on the vehicles and stuff."

> "THE ATTRACT SEQUENCE, WITH THE CHOIR AND RING WORLD, IS GORGEOUS. BUT I COULD NEVER BUY INTO HALO'S FICTION"

And the weakest part of the experience? "The presentation was good at promising a lot; the whole attract sequence, with the choir and the ring world, is gorgeous. But I could never buy into the fiction of *Halo*. You're playing that opening mission, that insertion where you drop down onto this ring, and you're thinking, 'Fuck! This story's going places.' Then the badass aliens are flying around in their ships and it all feels really naughty and fun. And then these little funny guys start doing slapstick, and it's kind of, 'OK, I'll run with it.' But the more I played of *Halo* in terms of the pitching of the story and the characters and stuff... I suspect that on the Bungie side it was quite tongue-in-cheek, but it was really important for [Microsoft] to have this shooter that appealed to their core market, which is teenagers and 20-something lads. I don't think those two things ever sat together really well.

"I could never really work out what was going on while I was playing, my narrative motivation. Am I a robot or just some big guy? I'm doing the classic sci-fi thing of everyone going, 'Oh my God, there's this great secret that's going to change everything.' Then [the game] reveals them and they're not terribly interesting. It seems to make that mistake of the thing you're doing being so important that there's no lull in the pacing. The minute you do something that's going to change the outcome of the war, someone appears in a cutscene and goes, 'No, no, no – now we've got to do this.' It's just relentless."

Doak balks at the degree to which fanboys have turned such vacuous hokum into a sprawling mythology. "'Of course it doesn't explain everything,' they'll say. 'You've got to read the book.' Well, I'm sure there are better books to read."

What really annoys Doak as a professional developer, though, is the first game's later level design. "It's the Library [level], isn't it? That horrible fucking endless cut-and-paste. 'Now I get to do the same thing over there.' The opening part of the game, in terms of pacing and stuff, is just really sexy and engaging: 'I'm not sure how the combat mechanics work, but I'm in a shooter. Shit, there's someone flying at me! I'd better hide. I can use the vehicles as well? Ooh.' Then it gets to this part where you're endlessly on foot with the same bloody attack patterns coming at you again and again. And those annoying things that shoot you with lasers. That's *Halo*'s biggest crime: 'That was really good. Did you like that? Well, you get to do it again now. And again.'

"It's funny, because that wouldn't happen now. People would look at the drama and entertainment and novelty of levels in a game, and someone would say, 'Look, I'm sorry, but this is just cut-and-paste crap here. Just take swathes of it out. We're not worried about the game



David Doak, freelance game consultant

taking ten hours to play through.' It's just padding. Or something someone had done that no one had the heart to tell them to take out."

Doak's more than happy to laud the art style, though, even if it's not perfect: "A lot of the things that look gaudy about the flak and particles and stuff are actually very well cued game signals when you're playing. There's a lot of tracer stuff going around that's all colour-coded nicely, so it helps you unpick what's going on and makes more confusing situations readable. But there's a lot of what we used to call 'programmer pink', when a programmer makes up a colour for something with some obvious hex value."

And while generally praising *Halo*'s multiplayer component, Doak admits that when he finally did get a chance to play it he was too far behind the competition to be hooked. The floaty vehicle handling is also singled out for particular criticism. "I suspect the reasons are all to do with physics performance," he notes. "It's a costly part of the runtime, so having everything a bit slower makes it easier. You get fewer collisions and stuff. That's why it's like that, I'm sure."

He struggles with the inventory system, too, which is to suggest that the system struggles to properly accommodate its players. "I bet you the fanboys can do it with their eyes shut, but I've found that any attempt to manage your inventory in a firefight ends badly. You'd be hacking away at something and some guy drops a cool gun, but you know that if you go over there you'll spend ten seconds, which feels like an hour, jigging around."

Many of these issues have been dealt with, or at least improved, throughout the series, but others have not. Story tends to be the sticking point, and Doak's most damning remark is the one that rings truest: "I played *Reach* and just couldn't remember if I'd finished the third one. There was some big boss battle with a spidery thing that you climbed on... I can't remember any of the rest of it.

"What they did was start to erode the thing that was interesting about the first one, which is that you're the über-soldier. They diluted the pool... When Bungie bought themselves back out of Microsoft, people were going, 'But they'll never get to make another *Halo*!' And you think, 'Yeah, and thank Christ for that.' Surely they were fed up of making it. They must have been."



THE EVIL WITHIN

Game Resident Evil 4 **Developer** Capcom **Format** 360, GameCube, PC, PS2, PS3, Wii **Original release** 2005

We've looked at games that triumph and endure in spite of their circumstances, but what about those that live because of them? Games that let technology and tradition give them shape and focus, hiding whatever flaws can't be turned into groundbreaking, precision-engineered features. There can be few greater examples than *Resident Evil 4*, a game so indebted to the foibles of GameCube and survival horror that it wouldn't exist without them. Not, at least, in the form that defined a generation of action games.

Troubleshooting such a masterpiece is like trying to defuse a tamper-proof bomb: who can say what problems will cascade through the system when you make the slightest change? It's a very real challenge, too, when you're one of the numerous developers charged with making a *Resident Evil 4* clone. Climax isn't one of them, but it certainly knows their handiwork. Prior to making *Silent Hill: Shattered Memories*, it had to rescue PSP's *Silent Hill: Origins* from the efforts of another studio.

"Their template had been: let's copy *Resident Evil 4*, but in the *Silent Hill* world," recalls design director **Rhys Cadle**. "So some of the things that didn't work 100 per cent in *Resident Evil 4*, like that control scheme, with the offset character and the tank controls, is great in open spaces, but if you put it in a corridor then it's not so good. Transposing those controls into more domestic interiors and doorways was not a fun thing to play through. The emphasis on QTEs and combat and boss fights and set-pieces didn't gel. The game had car chases and other huge set-pieces that felt wrong. So when we did *Origins*, our response to that was to say, partly due to lack of time and money: 'Why are we doing this? No one's ever made a *Silent Hill* game on a PSP properly, so let's just do that and do it well.'

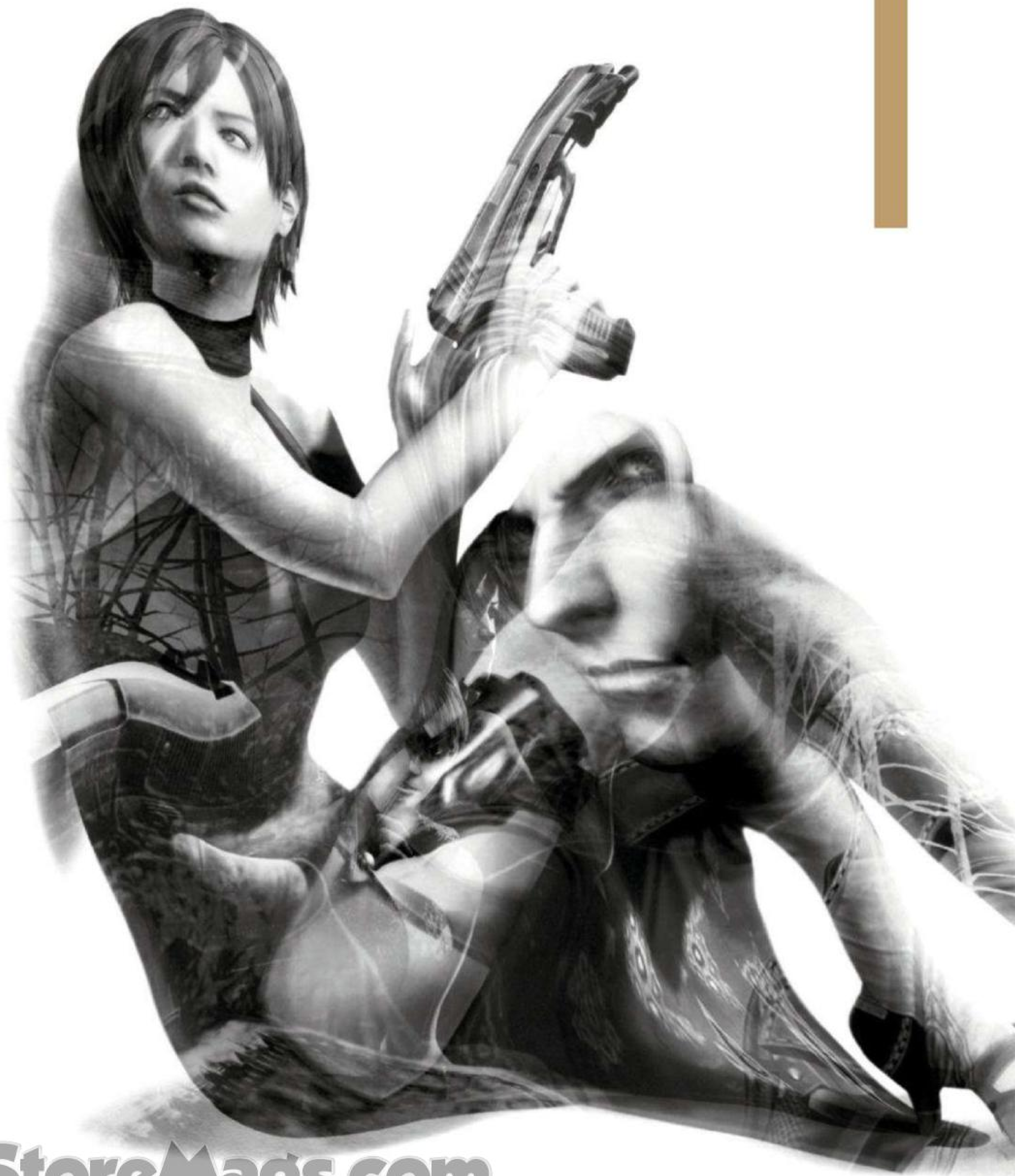
> "YOU GET TO THE END AND YOU STILL SEE THE SAME CHARACTERS FLYING OFF IN HELICOPTERS, AND TALKING ABOUT SECRET PROJECTS"

Cadle played though *Resident Evil 4* "in a very small number of sessions over an intense weekend; I actually had to take breaks because I found it so intense. Not in the scary sense necessarily, but because it was so relentless how the gameplay worked. And I kept being amazed at how bloody long the thing was. It was slightly daunting as a developer, going: 'I've just played 25 hours and it's never really repeated itself, and it's just non-stop.' They didn't really take their foot off the gas for more than 30 seconds."

Famously prototyped over several years, *Resident Evil 4* promised reinvention and subsequently transformed a series apparently in its death throes. But not entirely, as Cadle explains: "The lustre did come off a little bit, because a big part of their spiel was that, 'We're getting rid of zombies and the Umbrella Corporation,' yet two-thirds of the way in you find the hidden underground base and those same old sequences: 'Oh, there's been some strange experiments going on.' Even with awesome stuff like the Regenerators [monsters whose weak spots are given away by a heat-sensing sniper scope].

"There's definitely something about them not necessarily having the conviction to turn over a new leaf. Because you get to the end of the game and you still see the same characters flying off in helicopters, talking about secret test projects and what have you. It wasn't about Umbrella as a technicality, but the original premise was being dumped in this quasi-Spanish village, and the randomness of hunting for the President's daughter. It had this weird B-movie vibe, but then, like the first season of 24, it slowly peeled back to this creepy little kid you thought was the big baddie, and then all the people with chainguns and rocket launchers."

None of this is necessarily bad, he admits. Yes, an explicit part of the *Shattered Memories* design doc was: 'No bosses, just set-pieces,' but that was mainly due to the fact that "the *Silent Hill* combat system is at odds with a monster with lots of hitpoints running around". Indeed, the *Resident Evil* series will likely never be as good again. Not least because the original version of the game was presented in a grungy standard definition perfectly matched to its torches-and-pitchforks conceit – itself instrumental in giving the scripted AI a feral cunning. But by mixing the old and new to create this 'ultimate' *Resident Evil*, flaws must surely exist at the genetic level?




Rhys Cadle, design director, Climax

"Well, you're in that tricky scenario a lot of the classic Japanese games are in. The game evolved along a certain path, and the original was very much of the *Alone In The Dark* model. A lot of the contrivances made sense in that Lovecraftian setting, like the fact that all the story's told through diary pages. You've got all those mechanics that are so integral to the experience that if you start tinkering, it all falls apart. *Resident Evil*'s always been happy to put its hand up and say it's a B-movie and that it's going to have corny dialogue, but I don't know how much of that was one of those weird things that evolved with the franchise, because a lot of it came out of the mistranslations."

The core of the *Resident Evil 4* experience is also brutally simple: "The defining ingredient is the minigame shooting gallery, which crystallises the fact that the entire game is a shooting gallery: your character's generally stuck to the spot; some of the zombies move faster, and they have different heights they can walk on; there are destructible scenery elements and nice shiny trinkets you can shoot; and you've got a bunch of moving targets with different priorities. It's a shooting gallery on wheels, and there are a hundred different ways to dress that up."

"RESIDENT EVIL'S ALWAYS BEEN HAPPY TO PUT ITS HAND UP AND SAY IT'S A B-MOVIE AND IT'S GOING TO HAVE CORNY DIALOGUE"

Is that a bad thing, though? On the contrary, Cadle says, "it's really, really fun". It's also somewhat ironic that between *Resident Evil 4* and *Killer 7*, another Capcom shooting gallery, it's the latter that's more technically a survival horror, staying loyal to the tropes of maps, keys and constant retreading. In fact, Cadle disputes that *Resident Evil 4* is a horror game at all: "It's an action game. It's intense, it's disturbing, but it's not horror. People get, if they're going into a horror game, that there might be periods when it's not fun."

This, he explains, is why *Resident Evil* is "the healthier" of the so-called survival horror masters, *Silent Hill* being a more left-field endeavour constantly conflicted over what it should be. *Silent Hill* is a true analogue for cheap, niche horror movies, which are – in a cruel twist – enormously expensive to emulate in videogames. *Resident Evil 4*, on the other hand, is a wildly populist blockbuster that, with its ability to spin carnival gameplay into epic adventure, might just be the most villainous game in our entire line-up. "I think what you've just made us prove is that although *Resident Evil 4* doesn't really have any faults, all of its faults were what it brought into the world," chuckles Cadle. "A lot of the criticism you can level at it is what other people did with the template, because it took the QTEs to a level that just about worked for that game. And after that, everyone else said, 'Well, if they can do it, we can.'

"The number of people I've spoken to in movies who say that when Star Wars came out it completely ruined the business of making movies... Prior to that it was something grown-ups did. You think of the golden age of movies in the '70s, and then the minute Star Wars came out – and people realised you could merchandise this stuff to kids – that fundamentally changed the logistics. It changed everything.

"If you look at the games that have been successes, the kinds of games publishers are asking for after *Resident Evil 4*, it's very much defined by that blockbuster approach. Not just the content, but the amount of content people expect, and being able to focus on a core set of mechanics but roll that through a whole load of scenarios. It's hard to argue with it, because you play through *Resident Evil 4* and you're like, 'Wow!'

"But I remember when **Edge** did their recent 100 games list and it was really near the top, and I had to be honest with myself and say that when I played that game it was a 10/10 experience. But actually I look back at the experiences in games that I cherish and *Resident Evil 4* didn't really have those. If it had been a movie, it would have been the kind of thing I'd see on a wet Saturday afternoon, laughing at its bad jokes and explosions. It's one of those sad things when people ask if games are competing on a level footing with movies. It's exciting, and the level of craftsmanship is incredible, and it enabled other developers to do things that are slightly deeper, but it's still the silly blockbuster about a guy rescuing a President's daughter from a bunch of zombies and insane midgets."





WORLDS APART?

Game Super Mario Galaxy **Developer** Nintendo EAD Tokyo **Format** Wii **Original release** 2007

When someone takes a shot at Nintendo's mighty mascot, they seldom aim to wound. He may walk and talk like a mustachioed toddler, but don't be fooled: Mario comes protected by Metacritic-toughened armour and the most zealous bodyguards in gaming. His ego takes nothing short of a meteor strike to bruise.

That's what Internet celebrity Ben 'Yahtzee' Croshaw must have thought when firing two very similar salvos at *Super Mario Galaxy* and its sequel. 'Stagnation' was the watchword of the second, closely followed by a breathless stream of fan-baiting blows. His is not a viewpoint shared by our two volunteers here, though: **Dino Patti**, CEO of *Limbo* creator Playdead, and veteran *BioShock* level designer **Steve Gaynor**, who is now freelancing.

Patti begins: "For what it wants to do, *Super Mario Galaxy* is perfect. It's just super-hardcore in doing core gameplay. You can't do the puzzles by half: you either do them or don't. It's maybe not the best game in the world – it doesn't really have a moody or intriguing story – but [Nintendo] know what they want.

"It's kind of become a joke: how are they going to kidnap the Princess this time? But what you always want in a game is a sense of purpose, no matter what you do. Nintendo just wants to deepen this. It wants flat characters – characters without flaws. It would be really cool if they did have one instalment that actually had a twist: you find the Princess halfway through and then do something unexpected. That would be great, but it'd be worse if they tried and didn't fulfil it."

"As a level designer," says Gaynor, "I felt really kind of inspired – or maybe, in a way, jealous at the time – of the core tenets of their level design, with the crazy abstract spheroid playspaces, and the arbitrary gravity. It was a really cool, interesting, original idea that supported classic platformer gameplay in a new way, but also they took full advantage of the core premise, and kept pushing the possibilities further and further. The central ideas really gave the designers a ton of freedom, and they didn't take that for granted, which was awesome to see."

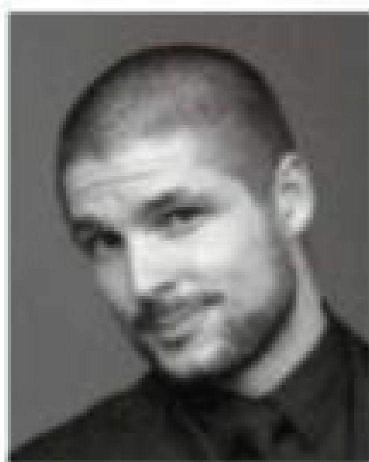
> "THERE'S THAT KIND OF BORING AND POINTLESS INTRO LEVEL, AND THEN YOU'RE HAVING TO GO BACK TO THE HUB"

Our pair agree that despite the presence of Nintendo's latest invention, the Wii Remote, the game doesn't feel as revolutionary as *Super Mario 64*. But that isn't a problem. "The motion controls were more of an optional feature or a support feature," says Gaynor. "You could use them to shoot star bits at enemies and stun them to optimise your performance, but they didn't get in the way or feel gimmicky, which is a trap that so many Wii games fall into. It felt like the best use of the system thus far, partly because of how little it relied on the [motion] features.

"It's interesting that a flagship Wii game didn't really use the Wii motion functionality much. But, honestly, I think that's for the best, and shows a lot of really good, smart restraint on the part of the designers, because they recognised that they were strictly making a platform game, and that motion didn't have a ton of relevance to that design, so they didn't shoehorn it in. The fact that they shipped the motion controls they did probably means it was the best implementation there could've been for that project, which is great, and I'm really glad they apparently weren't under enough external pressure to just cram unnecessary gimmick motion features into the game that most likely would've made it worse."

Patti echoes those sentiments: "It's called *Galaxy*, and that's a cool theme, and they got the best out of that theme. Nintendo knows the essence of gameplay, whereas the big military shooters wouldn't know gameplay if it bit them in the ass."

For all its successes, though, there are some flaws. Its intro – awkwardly blending tutorial and cutscene, with a glaze of unskippable text – shows that *Super Mario Galaxy* might have a knowing disregard for story, but it's hardly 100 per cent game. "With a lot of Nintendo's core properties, it seems to be more and more of a problem: how much text you have to advance through to get to the game," says Gaynor. "There's that kind of boring and pointless intro level, and then you're having to go back to the hub and talk to various characters and advance through their


Dino Patti, chief executive officer of Playdead


Steve Gaynor, freelance writer and videogame designer

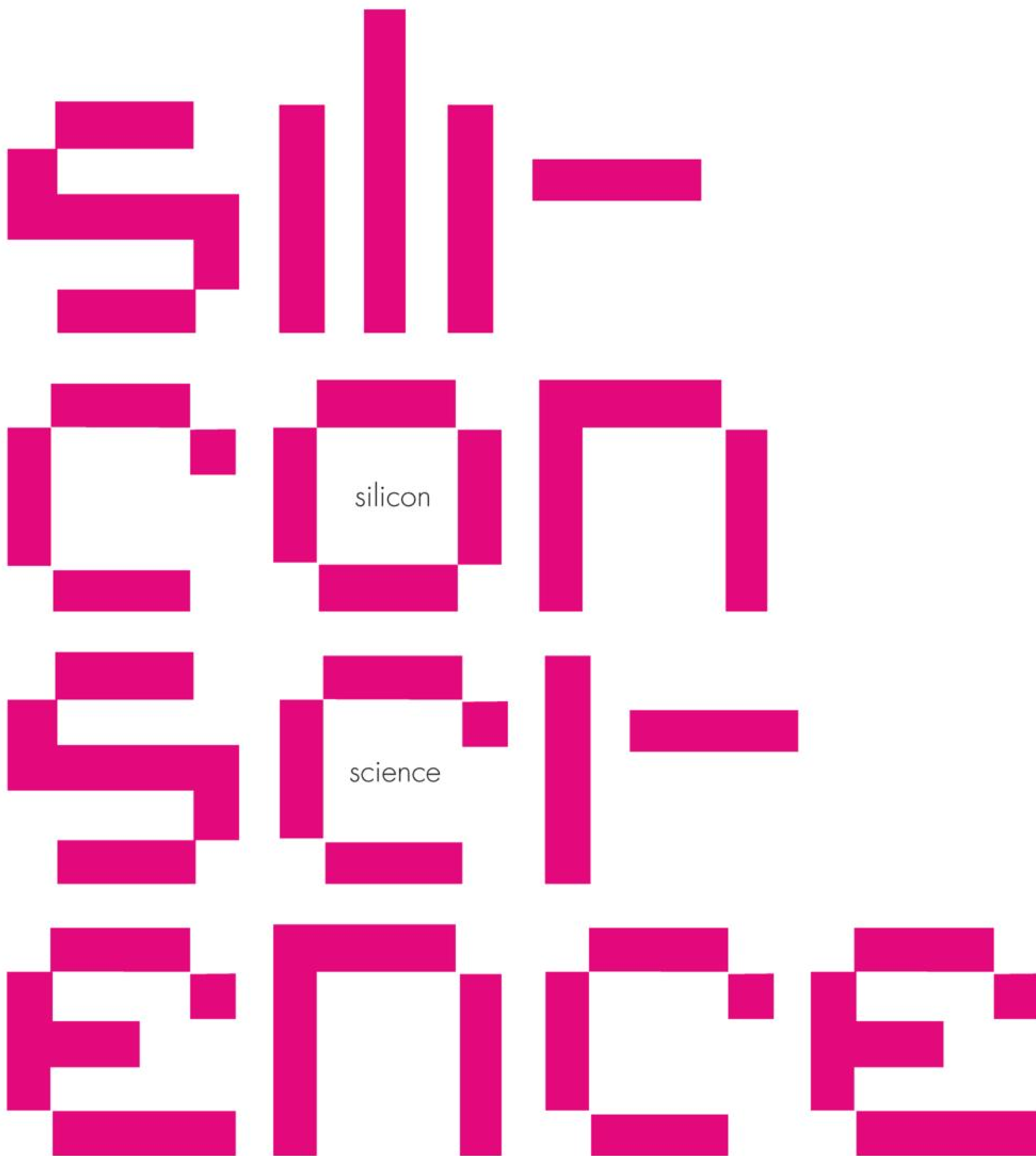
text while tutorial mechanics are still being introduced. And then there's the storybook stuff! The critical path story never seems to really add to the experience. So, yeah, I don't know – I'm not sure where the desire for more story by volume in Nintendo games comes from.

"It's possible it's some idea of expanding to a wider, more casual audience or something like that, especially with the identity of the Wii at the time. But in my experience, both hardcore and casual players equally want to get to the core experience as quickly and painlessly as possible, which in *Mario* is the play."

Patti thinks that idea of a broader Nintendo audience might explain the game's repetitive boss battles, too. "You can get stuck in *Limbo*, because we're targeting adults, but Nintendo want kids of maybe six and seven to play, all the way up to our age. These small iterations on the same boss – each one a little harder, maybe with a new trick – are a teaching method. The game's designed to take as many gamers through it as possible."

Perhaps it's inevitable, then, that there's a certain degree of conflict – the hardcore vs the casuals, old vs new. Gaynor sees the symptoms in its frequent returns to mechanics better left in the games that made them famous: "Like levels that were basically just single-gravity-direction *Super Mario 64* levels, or the ones where you were racing a stingray or whatever. Because something that was really good about the spheroid levels, aside from just being new and different, was that they were generally very forgiving, because gravity always pulled you back to a surface, so you couldn't just fall off the edge and die.

"In the more traditional platforming levels, or the race levels, you could kind of suddenly fail with this binary failstate, where you fell into the void or lost the race. You lost progress, and it could be frustrating. They also had the really hard challenge levels, which you never had to play if you didn't want to, and that kind of put them in a different category. But the other stuff you were required to deal with to progress, which rubbed its old-schoolness in your face. So the fact that they held on to some of the older-school styles of level, maybe just thinking that the audience would demand them if they weren't there, was probably the biggest blemish on an experience that otherwise felt very new and engaging."


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After emerging from the fertile soil that was Acorn Computing in the 1980s, the Cambridge-based ARM has fought its way into the upper echelons of the semiconductor industry armed with just one simple business tactic: creating low-power, high-spec designs and licensing them to a range of partners. Its success has seen its technology placed at the heart of modern gaming, with ARM-designed architecture in 95 per cent of all smartphones sold, as well as Nintendo's 3DS and Sony's PlayStation Vita hardware. Now the company is taking on the likes of Imagination Technologies in the high-end graphics processing sector with its advanced Mali-T600 range of GPUs, based on the Midgard architecture. It's also keeping one eye on the exploding tablet market and, of course, future generations of gaming hardware. We talk to **Paul Newby**, **Marcus McElroy** and **Ben James** to discover more about ARM's approach, how it's recruiting a new generation of talent, and where it sees its research – and the wider videogame industry – going in the coming years.

"We're not about raw GPU 3D graphics performance, but low-power performance. It's a totally different paradigm to an Xbox 360"

From left: Paul Newby (software engineering manager), Marcus McElroy (hardware engineering manager) and Ben James (SGL & staff engineer) at ARM's Cambridge, UK, headquarters



owadays, ARM is recognised as a strong player in mobile computing, but how did you get to this point?
Marcus McElroy We're known in the industry for class-leading, energy-efficient CPUs, so we have a foot in the door, and we have a lot of knowledge about how to build high-end processors. We've used the experience we've gained building CPUs and applied that to what are now becoming successful GPUs, which are being deployed into a vast array of devices.

But the market for low-power, ultra-efficient chips must have been obvious since the rise of mobile phones in the '90s – why didn't you come up against more competition?
MM I think [other companies] did realise, but the unique thing about ARM is the partnership business model. So whereas others have been focused on what they've historically done well by themselves, we have taken input from, and worked very closely with, a wide base of customers – we've produced ideas and come up with solutions to their problems. It costs a lot of money to develop the sort of stuff we develop, and actually, in the current climate, companies are looking more and more toward outsourcing and consolidation. ARM is delivering to our customers not just the ingredients, but also the recipe book on how to generate really high-performance, low-power devices. Our customers then spend their money creating tasty dishes from those recipes, and spinning them in a different way to create a niche for themselves.
Paul Newby We're innovating in this space, coming up with different architectures for the future, removing the need for other companies to do the same. And the royalty-based business model that's used is far better for [our clients] than investing heavily in their own R&D. That business model is a crucial part of where we are today.



To clarify, you don't manufacture parts within the company, right?
MM We do a small amount of manufacturing – as part of the verification of our hardware and semiconductor IP designs, we produce silicon prototypes. It's low volume, but an extremely important part of our validation process.

What are the new uses emerging for your technology?
PN We get different use cases from different customers – our interface with them is very much at the graphics API level, so we also work with OEMs to make sure we're aware of exactly how things are going to be used. We have internal research that looks into the future – the next big thing that will be used to exercise the GPU, for example. There's a lot of buzz at the moment around GPU computing – using the GPU as a general-purpose computing device, so that's OpenCL if you're looking at it from a Khronos API point of view, or Google Renderscript more recently if you're coming from an Android point of view. It's going to be interesting to see how that takes off.

What are the specific benefits we'll see in gaming?
PN Well, there are a number of things that have typically run on the CPU – but you can now utilise the highly parallel environment of the GPU to accelerate that content. Physics engines, games engines – they could make full use of an extensive GPU parallel computing device. Depending on the use case, significantly higher performance can be achieved harnessing the computational power of the GPU.
MM We call it 'visual computing'. GPUs are moving from what were traditionally 2D and 3D graphics accelerators to devices that are extremely powerful for stream processing and general-purpose computation. You can use that power to accelerate physics, you can use it for emerging interface technologies such as face and speech recognition, you can use it for high-dynamic range processing and filtering effects on your camera… All those things that were traditionally done through the CPU or a dedicated DSP on the device.
PN It's highly parallel, it's about performing the same sort of operation on a number of pixels, so image processing will be a big deal. It'll be interesting to see how many companies really start utilising that over the next year. We support it ➋

CAREER FOCUS

After studying electronics and computer systems engineering at the University Of York, Ben James joined ARM five years ago, originally working in the software group on a security project named TrustZone. He then moved into hardware verification, where new chip designs are rigorously tested, and is now verifying the Mali-T600 series of GPUs. "I moved there because I'm a pedant, and that's a skill you need in verification," he says. "You have to be very exacting and able to badger people to get things how they should be."
Apart from that, what are the key tasks involved? "Verification is testing if something meets the requirements," he explains. "So you have a specification, and a model which implements the specification, then your final design. Verification is about ensuring that the model and the final design are functionally equivalent – it's ensuring everything that should happen does happen. Essentially, we hit it with a hammer and see if it still works."

all, obviously; we have to prepare for the next wave of devices.

Your Mali-T604 processor will be starting to appear in devices this year. What can you tell us about it, specifically its capabilities?
MM The key things about the Mali-T600 series is its high performance and ability to support a wide range of graphics and compute APIs. The Mali-200 and Mali-400 MP devices are traditional 2D/3D graphics technologies. The new stuff in the Mali-T600 series of GPUs is focused on emerging graphics technologies such as the next generation of the Khronos OpenGL ES API. But we've also added computational resources and a huge amount of software to facilitate customers wanting to use our GPUs for general-purpose computing through full-profile OpenCL and Renderscript computing.
PN We're looking at the Windows side of things as well – we'll be supporting the next wave of DirectX, for example.

Qualcomm claims that its next GPU, within Snapdragon S4, is comparable to an Xbox 360. Is it possible to compare the hardware you're designing at ARM with the performance of current consoles?
MM It's difficult to say, because we have such a scaleable architecture; we can configure our GPUs from a very small number of processing elements to a very large number, and your performance envelope is therefore very wide. But, yes, we're definitely in the same ballpark, and in some configurations *beyond* what you'd see in a console today.
PN And you're not really comparing apples to apples here. We're not about raw GPU 3D graphics performance; we're all about low-power graphics performance – that's getting the job done in the least amount of power. It's a completely different paradigm to something like an Xbox 360.

life at arm

You have over 2,100 people working at ARM now – what sort of projects are they involved in?
MM On the hardware side, it's a real spectrum. At one end, it's research and development and analysis of next-generation designs, which ultimately feeds ideas into mainstream engineering. A lot of engineers there are working at the micro-architecture level, so they're taking these high-level ideas and they're assessing whether they can be built into hardware constructs. If they can, those designs get committed and, once specified and coded, they are extensively verified by Ben and his team to ensure they're meeting the criteria and are functionally robust. Ultimately, when the things are plugged together they must operate at a high performance and be seamless from an integration point of view.

"There's a sense of pride in seeing your ideas going all the way through that product chain and dropping out in a device years later"

What are the most rewarding aspects of the job?
Ben James It's working with incredibly intelligent people, learning every day and dealing with challenging problems that are interesting to solve. There's a real sense of achievement in fixing a problem that's been really awkward to go through.
MM I think all the engineers get a huge amount of pleasure from seeing something they've hand crafted and worked on for years appearing in a device. There's a sense of pride in seeing your ideas going all the way through that product chain and dropping out in a device years later.

It seems that ARM has a very thin management layer, perhaps because the company was established and is still largely run by engineers. Is that an accurate appraisal?
BJ We've got quite a small-company ethos. You effectively only have two managers: a line manager, who is your traditional project manager, and then you have a technical lead – although they're really working on the same level as you most of the time. It's not a case of being dictated to; there's a lot of freedom in what you can do, and there is a lot of respect between the engineers. Generally, discussions around a specific technical feature won't be eschewed by someone because they're more technical or higher up the command chain. It's all very open.

Is the company generally open to ideas that come from junior members of the engineering team?
PN When anybody joins, after a certain period of time we'll ask for their input and any areas they can see for improvement, based on what they've done so far. To be honest, a huge part of what we do is driven by the engineering community. It's a highly collaborative environment at all levels.
MM We also allow the engineers to take time out from their day jobs. It's very easy to get stuck into focusing on deadline-driven projects, but we have processes in place to allow people, as best we can, to take time out to innovate. Once a quarter, we have these innovation days, where the entire engineering

community downs tools; it's an open day, you do what you want, but the idea is you use the time to come up with novel blue-sky solutions to everyday problems that people are encountering on projects, or on general areas that you think will be beneficial for ARM. Innovation is at the heart of what we do, and we try hard to foster that, because the success of our business is based on it.

What sort of projects have you seen come out of innovation days?
BJ Well, it's hard to blue-sky a new processor in a day! It tends to be more micro-architectural changes, [things like] an optimisation here or there. Small ideas like that, which build up to a product, rather than: 'Here's the next Cortex core.'
PN And innovation days can be about the way that we do things, rather than the product itself.
MM One example I can think of is a texture-compression format which ARM has just proposed. It's called ASTC – adaptive scaleable texture compression – and it's precisely what it says: a novel texture compression format that we've put some fairly extensive engineering effort into.

What are the specific benefits of the ASTC format?
BJ Better compression, higher signal-to-noise ratio, lower gate count… It's pretty much across the field better than other alternatives.

So if someone were to join the media processing division of ARM tomorrow, what sort of projects would they find themselves working on?
MM They'd be working around future methods of improving visual computing, which covers the traditional graphics APIs – OpenGL, OpenCL, OpenVG, DirectX – but, as we mentioned, more recently it's general-purpose computing for GPUs (GPGPU). We're looking at how we evolve visual computing in general and at the evolution of GPGPU computing.

Do managers throughout the company still have a certain amount of direct input into the engineering process?
MM I'm much less hands-on than I used to be. A day for me is really about ensuring that the engineering team are doing the right thing, that the needs of the customers and stakeholders have been understood, that the plans we have in place to



deliver a product are robust, and that the resources being applied to the project are sufficient. If not, I'll be looking at ways to establish additional resources through growing engineering talent or recruiting new people. There's innovation to be made in how we run and track projects, and we have to get quite low-level at some points to understand an argument that the team might be putting forward that we may need to conclude.
BJ That's another great thing about ARM. Practically all of the managers have a direct engineering background, so the whole team works better as a result. You don't feel like you're talking to a manager, you feel like you're talking to a fellow engineer who you can discuss technical problems with.

In which areas are you looking to recruit new staff at the moment?
PN We have a large software team spanning ARM's Cambridge, Trondheim, Lund and Shanghai design centres. We have vacancies ranging from graduate level through to industry guru level. We need embedded software engineers, preferably with C programming experience and exposure to Khronos APIs such as OpenGL ES, OpenVG, OpenCL and EGL. We're looking for people with experience in embedded software driver development, perhaps with graphics experience, but that's not essential. One area we need people is in integration with various windowing systems, so EGL from a Khronos point of view. But generally embedded software developers who have a good knowledge of SOCs, MMUs, who understand how all that hangs together, and who understand the resource-constrained environment so they're able to make good judgement calls from a software point of view. We're recruiting heavily in that area at the moment. So, in summary, driver development, graphic experience and windowing system integration experience.

We also need software architects with experience in GPU device drivers and Khronos graphics APIs engineers with experience in content validation, performance benchmarking and optimisation of graphics SW stacks and hardware.

Where are you finding people to fill these sorts of positions?
PN If we can see a way in which we can actually take more general software development experience in the embedded sector, we will consider those people. In terms of ➋

software architecture, it's a layered architecture and there are areas of it that will lend themselves to more generic embedded software developers. We'd consider people without graphics experience for those roles, so we can tap into other parts of the industry – whatever type of embedded development.

We continue to look for the best graphics people. People with good experience of windowing system integration, Android experience, DirectX experience – those sorts of people are who we're really looking for at the moment.

How about on the hardware side?

MM Generally, it's people from a relevant industry background, but it doesn't necessarily have to be 3D graphics exclusively – people who have a more generic computer science CPU/video processor type of background are all the sort of applicants we'd consider.

We're interested in talking to people who have hardware design or verification experience and are motivated by the same things we are – producing really cool technology. Specifically, we're looking for engineers who are experienced in GPU architecture and/or micro-architecture, engineers who have project experience in designing complex hardware using a hardware description language like Verilog or VHDL, and engineers who have project experience in verifying complex hardware using a hardware verification language like SystemVerilog.

We also take graduates, typically people who have studied computer architecture, electronic engineering, computer systems. But equally, there are people in the industry – bedroom hackers, people who have a passionate interest in and understanding of 3D graphics technology – who we wouldn't rule out if they want to pursue a career in GPU hardware development.

Do you take graduates on the software side as well?

PN Yes, and we find that we can grow them into what we need as a business. A lot of the people we bring in stay with ARM for years – our level of retention is really good. In terms of bringing in people with more generic skills, what we're looking for from a generic software engineer is the maturity of that individual, their experience and skills in general software development. If they tell us they pick up new things really quickly, great. It's about getting the best people. One thing I'd have to say about ARM is that the people are technically brilliant. It's all about hiring the best people. If that means hiring the best generic software developer who you then have to train up in graphics, that's fine.

"The process guys always say, 'Next year it won't work,' but researchers keep managing to pull some trick out of the bag"

Is there a lot of training, or are newcomers usually moved straight onto live projects?

PN It's a little bit of everything. Like any company, we have a standard set of training programmes. Other than that, there are things that are based on your personal development, on chats with your manager, on how you want to evolve your career. A lot of it is on the job, with mentoring and coaching from others.

MM I would say [that they go] in at the deep end! That's how ARM tends to work. From day one, people are given challenging technical tasks to work on. That might be in conjunction with a more senior designer, but we expect them to be contributing from the beginning. We will support their development by gradually opening them up to more challenging and demanding roles within a project.

PN Being flung in at the deep end isn't a bad thing. You tend to find the sorts of applicants we attract are those who want to work with technically brilliant people… I mean, learning is a big carrot for technical engineers!

And what about progression?

PN ARM is one of the very few companies that has a clear distinction between its management path and technical path – and you're not limited either way. In a lot of companies, you'll get so far on the technical side, and will then have to flip to management in order to progress. That does not happen at ARM. We take personal development very seriously here. And there are no limits to how quickly you can progress. I think this is all fairly unusual.

BJ It's also worth noting that graduates are on an accelerated programme, so they're reviewed and assessed twice as often as more established engineers, because they're expected to be ramping up quite quickly – they're given a chance to really shine.

PN And people identified as high achievers are marked as such and they're closely managed to ensure that they get the attention they need.

Do you think game coders would settle well into positions here?

MM Yes, we need developers who feel that they could write killer shaders to stress test our designs. It would help if they knew a bit about – or were interested in learning – how GPU data paths work. We also want developers who feel that they could write stunning demos to showcase our technology.

power up

Obviously, with each iteration of ARM's CPUs and GPUs you're getting more processing power with more efficiency, but will there soon come a point at which you can't iterate any further along your current architectural lines?
MM Graphics, by its nature, is incredibly parallelised, so theoretically you could have one computation element working on one pixel in parallel with thousands of others, but in practice you can't build that – the thermal effects, the packaging costs and the software complexity are enormous. So, yes, there is an artificial wall, but that wall continually moves. New process technologies are rolled out, you can push the envelope in terms of energy density… At some point, I'm sure we'll have to look at alternative architectures, and that's what we're doing as part of our ongoing R&D; we're innovating in other ways of doing the same thing at a lower cost and with a lower energy footprint.

But in terms of processing power, are there any plateaus on the horizon where the industry may have to change its approach to CPU and CPU design?
BJ Well, the end of Moore's Law is always just around the corner. The process guys always say, "Next year it won't work, so find something new," but researchers keep managing to pull some trick out of the bag to make it work. But now, if you look at the numbers, we're getting to gate thicknesses of a few atoms, so the point at which it really won't work any more isn't too far away. There will be a revolution at some point, but no one quite knows what it is and when it will happen.

During our previous visit, we saw the microcontroller lab, where your engineers are designing cheap, low-power and high-volume chips that could be used in all sorts of appliances. Do you think we're heading towards a future of pervasive computing in which just about everything has a CPU and a Wi-Fi connection?
BJ I think it will be pervasive, but also transparent. Where you can have a light switch, you can have a microprocessor, so there will be one there at some point. It shouldn't be in the way, it should silently make things work better. That's my vision of the future!



What do you think we can expect from the next generation of smartphones in terms of gaming performance?
PN It comes down to how they're going to use all the grunt we provide on our GPUs. Again, I think it's worth watching how GPUs are going to be used as general-purpose computing devices, and how they'll take advantage of that extra processing power. I think there will be new killer user cases that can take advantage of all this processing power we provide. It's about people understanding the technology that's in the device and making use of it, because it's no longer just a matter of 2D and 3D graphics hardware acceleration.
MM I think you'll see a platform that will have functionality allowing developers to use GPUs for nontraditional workloads, but the rate of adoption for that is anyone's guess. We believe that, as we provide this infrastructure, companies will begin to see the benefits and make use of them in everyday applications. At the moment, there are many ideas about how GP on GPUs might be employed, but no one is really going down that route just yet. Over the course of this year, people will start to deploy apps based on the capabilities of our GPU hardware.

When we spoke previously, ARM was looking beyond portable devices and toward breaking into the traditional console space. Is that still the case?
MM It's a very active area that we're keeping a close eye on.
PN The technology and architecture that we provide doesn't preclude us from being in that space. The computational and graphics power that we provide would be sufficient. It's something we're watching.

Do you think console design is likely to move more into your area, with smaller, more portable machines? How about tablet-based consoles?
PN It's interesting to watch – I can certainly see the benefits of tablets.

Let's talk in terms of a time frame. What do you think the engineers here will be working on in, say, five years' time?
MM I think that we'll see shader complexity increasing significantly. At the moment, [they're] complex, but there are certain techniques that people want to employ that will take that to the next level. ■

TABLET TIMES

The consumer tech market trending toward tablets hasn't gone unnoticed at ARM. "They're pervasive in the market at the moment, and that's all down to low-power computing," Paul Newby notes. "The technology wouldn't have been possible five years ago."

Importantly, the company sees tablets becoming part of the wider living room entertainment space. "As computing power increases," says Ben James, "we're going to see more tablets driving larger displays – perhaps instead of standalone games consoles doing the same thing. It opens up lots of possibilities. Fundamentally, if you can take your games console or computing device with you in your bag, you can plug it in anywhere – you don't need a standalone PC."

The 'second screen' concept is, of course, what's driving Nintendo's Wii U design. It may also be in the design plans for Microsoft's next Xbox. Indeed, Xbox may well point the way for another change to tablets that ARM foresees. "I'm also expecting more physical interaction with the devices," says Newby. "So less based around finger controls and more tracking body movements and gestures." Marcus McElroy picks up the theme: "We've seen the human interface improving over the last few years with multitouch interfaces, but interaction through devices needs to be evolved."

So does ARM see the possibility of a tablet console with a built-in Kinect-like device? "Anything is possible," says James.

PLAY

REVIEWS. INTERVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Super Crate Box iOS
Infuriating, impossible and yet irresistible, this sadistic little platformer takes systems old and new (from the speedy singlescreen platforming of the original *Donkey Kong* to the eccentric cartoon look of *Super Meat Boy*) and shoves them in a blender. The result is an addictive fight to capture the crates and, as is equally important in a game where one hit kills, stay alive.

Kane & Lynch 2: Dog Days 360, PC, PS3
It may not have the tightest cover shooter mechanics, but that merely adds to the sense of peril as the Chinese underworld closes in on videogames' two craziest killers. The visual design makes the experience – like Black Rain by way of Michael Mann – as you run and yell your way through bleak urban battlefields.

Metal Gear Solid HD Collection 360, PS3
It's hard to believe it's been ten years since *Metal Gear Solid 2* turned fan expectation on its head. It's harder still to believe how well it holds up now, both as a fusion of still-unrivalled cutscene mastery and a meticulous stealth-action game. Watching the series evolve across *MGS2*, *MGS3* and *Peace Walker* is fascinating, and reveals that although Kojima may borrow greedily from pop culture, his videogame design remains truly original.

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE



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Why Uncharted to go will never beat Drake at home

For the second time now, Sony has built a portable gaming device around the promise of console-quality gaming. It's hard to argue with the results on a technical level – you'll never have taken a handheld system on your morning commute that's capable of such astonishing visual sheen before. And from a practical perspective, Vita's twin analogue sticks (along with a wealth of more novel control inputs) finally make experiences possible on a portable device that until now have been confined to the home.

But is *Uncharted: Golden Abyss* (p114) – as solid an entry in the continuing adventures of Nathan Drake as it might be – really what you want to be playing before the start of a working day? You can forget about holding a coffee in your free hand for a start, and must instead get to grips with a sophisticated control scheme while you're fighting for a seat. And even should you accomplish this, *Golden Abyss*'s dedication to the pacing and structure of its forebears – long periods of exploration and exposition, punctuated by action – make it quite unsuited to being played in precious slivers of free time.



You'll have your own context in which you play Vita games, of course, possibly one that's more tractable than a jammed train carriage. It would be an indispensable companion on long-haul flights, for instance, and obviously it works as well on a sofa as any portable device. But if the point of handheld gaming is convenience and flexibility, then trying to cram an experience designed for consoles onto a handheld seems to miss the point. Vita is a formidable piece of tech, but shouldn't it be turned in the direction of a new breed of portable game, rather than dragging experiences built for the home into the harsh light of day?

Final Fantasy XIII-2

Publisher Square Enix
Developer In-house
Format 360, PS3
Release Out now

Final Fantasy XIII's Active Time Battle (ATB) system was one expertly crafted change to the formula that came alongside some less welcome others. Key among these was that the usual sidequest-packed open-world structure had been replaced with a linear journey that offered the bare minimum of distractions. The reaction to *FFXIII* from fans and the press was mixed, which brings us to *FFXIII-2*, the sequel that Square Enix claims will give players what they wanted from the previous game. But while *FFXIII-2* is a polished production that certainly diverges, unfortunately it's also a baffling, boring and swampy thing to play.

It opens with a stunning cutscene in which Lightning – *FFXIII*'s hero, who's now playing the role of warrior goddess – does battle with a cackling evildoer. The sequence in its entirety takes about 20 minutes to play out, during which you're given limited control for brief stretches. This is a sign of things to come: a battle that is impossible to lose, a helping of QTEs, and some terrifically dull monologues. But *FFXIII-2*'s opening is so visually astonishing, featuring a gigantic city formed from crystal, monstrous armies clashing, and Lightning's dazzlingly choreographed advance through it all, that it's impossible to look away.

After this prelude, Lightning's off and you're in control of her sister, Serah, and accompanied by a time traveller called Noel who resembles a *Kingdom Hearts* B-lister. This is your party for the whole game, leading to *FFXIII-2*'s first change to the ATB system: Pokémon.

The system is once again built around three party members, each with certain roles that can be cycled through with a 'Paradigm Shift'. With two slots used here for Noel and Serah, the third is left open for creatures. You acquire new beasts by defeating them, and then they can be levelled up, assigned to your party (up to three monsters can be in your battle team, although only one can fight), or even fed to other creatures in order to transfer desirable traits.

It's simpler than it first appears, but the system is let down by the lack of space you have for combinations of roles (called 'paradigms'). Both Noel and Serah can learn multiple classes, and alongside your trio of monsters (each of which has a single speciality role) the number of possibilities is huge, but you're always limited to six paradigms in the actual battles. Among the many strengths of the ATB system is its flexibility – which having multiple monsters in different roles would seem to emphasise – but the feature's never given enough breathing space.

That's arguably a matter of preference, but a much wider problem is the game's lack of challenge. *FFXIII-2* is the first game in the series with an adjustable difficulty mode – a choice between Normal and Easy – but even on Normal this is a very easy game indeed. Common enemies are walkovers, and despite often taking a good deal of punishment, bosses are rarely a threat. The time investment required to complete *FFXIII-2* is huge, but our characters perished a mere handful of times. As an experiment, we left Serah and company to fend for themselves over the course of ten battles, with no player input. With an idle player character and two AI companions set up to attack and heal, our party emerged victorious from every fight.

The ATB system is still a fine achievement, and most of *FFXIII-2*'s tweaks are smart ones, but there's just nothing worth fighting against. Only two bosses required retries throughout our entire runthrough. Meanwhile, the addition of QTEs, bringing a few simplistic flourishes at the end of big battles, does little to enhance your sense of satisfaction.

Many of the locations are captivating, but this is still a poky world full of invisible walls and fixed details

Combat isn't the only area of *FFXIII-2* where the execution lags behind the concept. For instance, the game's structure is built around the 'Historia Crux', a level-select screen that allows you to jump between unlocked locations and alternate timelines at will. The idea of time travelling through *FFXIII*'s universe is a great one, but certain areas have had a lot more energy spent on them than others. On one occasion we visited a new level, a cutscene played out, and that was it.

Many of the locations are entirely captivating, however, and *FFXIII-2* further demonstrates the talent at work within Square Enix's art divisions. In terms of construction, however, this is still a poky world full of invisible walls and fixed details. The settings may have a sense of scope and majesty, but as interactive environments they get by with the bare minimum.

The lack of imagination in *FFXIII-2*'s subquests, which are a large part of its bulk, is what really drives this home. What do time travellers do? Well, these particular examples find lost watches, source old computer batteries, shear sheep, and beat up monsters. There's the odd detail that's more interesting – bringing back messages from the dead, or creating the right circumstances to fight something in the future – but in general *FFXIII-2* offers no more than cookie-cutter fetch quests that waste its theme's potential.

This is a big game, clocking in at about the 40-hour mark, but the lack of challenge in combat combined with the formulaic missions and frequent cutscenes too often make it feel like a sticky trudge. The visual and audio design is marvellous at times, offering up the kind of setting that you drink in before taking a single step, but the journey is always the same. The apparently open structure disguises a simple closed network of locked doors and narrow environments, while the ATB system is wasted on enemies that would struggle to defeat a corpse. Perhaps this is indeed the game *Final Fantasy* nuts thought they wanted, but surely even they'll be disappointed with the result.

5



BIND MOGGLING
A new element in *FFXIII-2*'s random battles is the Moogle Clock. When enemies spawn, a circle appears around Serah and begins counting down. During this time, you can either whack your foes to begin battle with a first-move advantage, or try to escape from the circle and avoid fighting altogether. As you play through *FFXIII-2*, its main use becomes clear: skipping as many fights as possible, because monsters remain at their old strength when you revisit earlier areas. And you thought it couldn't get any easier.



Locations such as Academia and the Bresha Ruins deliver on the multiple-timelines conceit, but far too much of the Historia Crux is made up of small environments that simply bulk things up





ABOVE Beating bigger nasties means building up their 'Stagger' meter with attacks in the ravager role, then switching to commando to finish them. For bosses, it's also key to debuff them just before the stagger takes effect

RIGHT The casino is a particular disappointment. Only chocobo racing and slot machines are available, both of which are poor distractions, but the real insult is the staff who tell you to watch out for when they finish construction of the other areas. In other words, certain games have been left out for introduction later via DLC. The same issues apply for the character Sazh: he apparently exists in *Final Fantasy XIII-2*'s world, but in fact this is another DLC lead-in





You can unleash 'feral link' attacks from beast companions, and the quicker you do the QTE, the more powerful they are

Post Script

Why is *Final Fantasy XIII-2*'s move towards realtime combat so half-baked?

At certain points during *FFXIII-2*'s cutscenes, the word 'Live' appears in the upper-left corner. It's a strange juxtaposition, and one we're more used to seeing on the evening news than in the midst of an overwrought JRPG interstitial. But Square Enix isn't trying to add a layer of reality, it's warning players who have put down the pad that their services will soon be required. Hey, you – pay attention!

The 'Live' cue means there will soon be a QTE, a finishing mechanic more familiar from the likes of *God Of War* or *Bayonetta* than the *Final Fantasy* series, and in the eyes of *FFXIII-2*'s developers this represents a move towards realtime combat. **Yoshinori Kitase**, the game's producer, even commented to us in **E**236 that, "We see many players moving away from games that used turn-based systems and towards what you might term an action-RPG. That's a trend, and you ignore things like that at your peril." This remark caused not a little consternation among the series' many fans.

Final Fantasy is one of gaming's global brands, a franchise that sells as well in the west as it does in the east – for the time being. It is used to being top dog. But now it's being squeezed from both sides, and the standard of competition is high. Last year saw both *Dark Souls* and *Xenoblade Chronicles* arrive from Japanese studios, while from the west there was *Skyrim*, and in a few months BioWare will round off the *Mass Effect* trilogy. None of those games are alike, but you suspect it's *Dark Souls* and *Mass Effect 3* that have caused concern at Square Enix HQ. Heads have clearly turned among *Final Fantasy*'s developers, because there's no other reason for *FFXIII-2* to incorporate realtime elements into the ATB system – one of the best turn-based fighting setups ever created – nor for producers to drop vague hints about a more action-oriented future for the series.

The problem with toe dipping like this is that it doesn't satisfy. The inconsistent appearance of QTEs and their ease means they're a mild irritation rather than a thrilling injection of realtime action, and they sit terribly uneasily next to the battle animations you see thousands of times in rotation.

This disjointedness can also be seen with the Moogle Clock. Here, enemies spawn pre-battle, during which time you can hit them with your weapon via a button press. It's presented as a realtime action in the overworld, but all it does is start the 'proper' turn-based fight, giving you the first turn. Your character is performing a hitting animation, but if you hit enemies, you're not actually hitting them. Does that make sense? Of course it doesn't – and, as you might well imagine, controlling your character during the Moogle Clock sequences doesn't feel anything like controlling a character in a thirdperson combat game.

Final Fantasy is not a realtime world – not when it comes to combat. And that's not a problem. What is strange about *FFXIII-2* is the attempt to bolt realtime action onto its turn-based structure. It feels out of place, and that's because it is. RPGs have been blending turn-based systems with realtime elements for many years now, but the truly great ones build everything around this. In *FFXIII-2*, you have a couple of realtime mechanics (and not especially ambitious ones) layered on top of a structure that wasn't designed for them, and that doesn't really need them either.

It may well be the case that *Final Fantasy XIV* takes the series in a radical new direction. Some would say, given recent history, it has no choice. It is a great pity, as well as a great irony, that Square Enix created the thrilling ATB system from its turn-based legacy, but has thus far been unable to make a *Final Fantasy* game that deserves it. If the future of the series is realtime combat, it's hard to escape the feeling that the baby may slide out of the frame along with the bath water. ■

Wipeout 2048

As Sony embraces the future with its new Vita handheld, Studio Liverpool rewinds the timeline of its poster-child sci-fi racer. Now grounded in a more relatable near-future setting, *Wipeout 2048* trades the futurism of, say, *Wipeout HD* or *Fury* for an earthier tone than fans may expect. As such, many tracks have wide lanes and are surrounded by contemporary-style architecture, drawing on the modern more than the imaginary.

It's a less exciting visual treatment than the series' more typical – and luminous – industrial sci-fi, and the blander setting is yoked to some disarmingly easy initial stages. At first, it feels as if Studio Liverpool has loosened up to make way for casual newcomers to Vita, but the difficulty spikes considerably in the second of the three seasons, seeing the AI step up and tracks become more intimate. As races and challenges go from cosy to cutthroat, success requires a hop into the options to remove pilot assist along with a toggle into the firstperson camera view to secure those extra inches of racing line. It sounds serious, and it is – *2048* has not abandoned the series' hardcore sensibilities, but simply provided an entry point for a more casual crowd. One case in point where well-honed twitch reactions are rewarded is the game's 'skill-cuts', which provide a get-out clause for those who have been unfairly overwhelmed by a bad hand of pick-ups. These shortcuts require razor-sharp timing of sidesteps – double-taps of the air brake that strafe your craft left or right – and demand dedication to master.

Indeed, learning *2048*'s tracks inside and out is as crucial as in the best *Wipeouts*, and Vita's responsive thumbsticks are more than capable of handling your delicate (or nervous) twitches, meaning you only have yourself to blame for botched barrel rolls. Speed pads and power-ups are the cornerstones of many challenges, and the restrictions laid out by the designers remix tracks to brilliant, nail-biting effect, with a cannon and leech-beam race through the Downtown map being a particular standout. The focus in *2048*, more than any other *Wipeout* besides *Fury*, is combat. The wider lanes enable the team to squeeze more craft and effects onscreen, and give you the leeway to bob and weave as you rattle off an array of projectiles and mines.

Sadly, *Wipeout 2048* routinely forces you to contend with the barrage of detail in each stage. With all the grittier textures, it's sometimes difficult to make out the track from the world beyond it. For once, Vita's screen feels small as you anxiously memorise tracks framed by towering architecture and populated with elements appropriate to the setting, from flocks of birds to confetti and floating balloons. Furthermore, with a group of warring racers onscreen, the framerate can suffer. It's not game-breaking, and it doesn't deter you from pressing on, but it is noticeable in a series built on speed and against the 60fps perfection of *Wipeout HD*.

Publisher SCE
Developer In-house (Studio Liverpool)
Format Vita
Release Out now (Japan), February 22 (EU, US)

The climactic campaign duels can be ranked alongside some of the series' adrenaline-pumping highs

That said, Combat (previously known as Eliminator) and Zone modes also make the transition to *2048*, and while the former in particular falls victim to framerate and visibility issues, Zone sees the game at its smoothest and most addictive. The later SOL and Empire Climb maps closely capture the ambitious, intricate layouts of classic *Wipeout*, and the game's climactic campaign duels can be ranked alongside some of the series' adrenaline-pumping high points.

Of course, a core component of any *Wipeout* is the soundscape, and here, as a Liverpudlian might put it, *2048* is sound as a pound. From the sonic boom of a speed pad to the robotic soundbites that announce pick-ups, the audio is as rich and detailed as the backdrops. The licensed music tracks have clearly been selected to complement the onscreen action, too, but it's a shame *2048* doesn't allow for custom soundtracks, and the playlist is a little lean.

A multiplayer campaign, cleverly threaded together with an unlock structure that mirrors the singleplayer game, adds weight and value to the package. It brings a unique slant to Vita's solid online potential, essentially gamifying your experience with friends by encouraging you to pursue objectives across randomly selected maps to progress. With a raft of unlockables to collect, this re-engineering of a campaign game for multiple users is one of *2048*'s key successes.

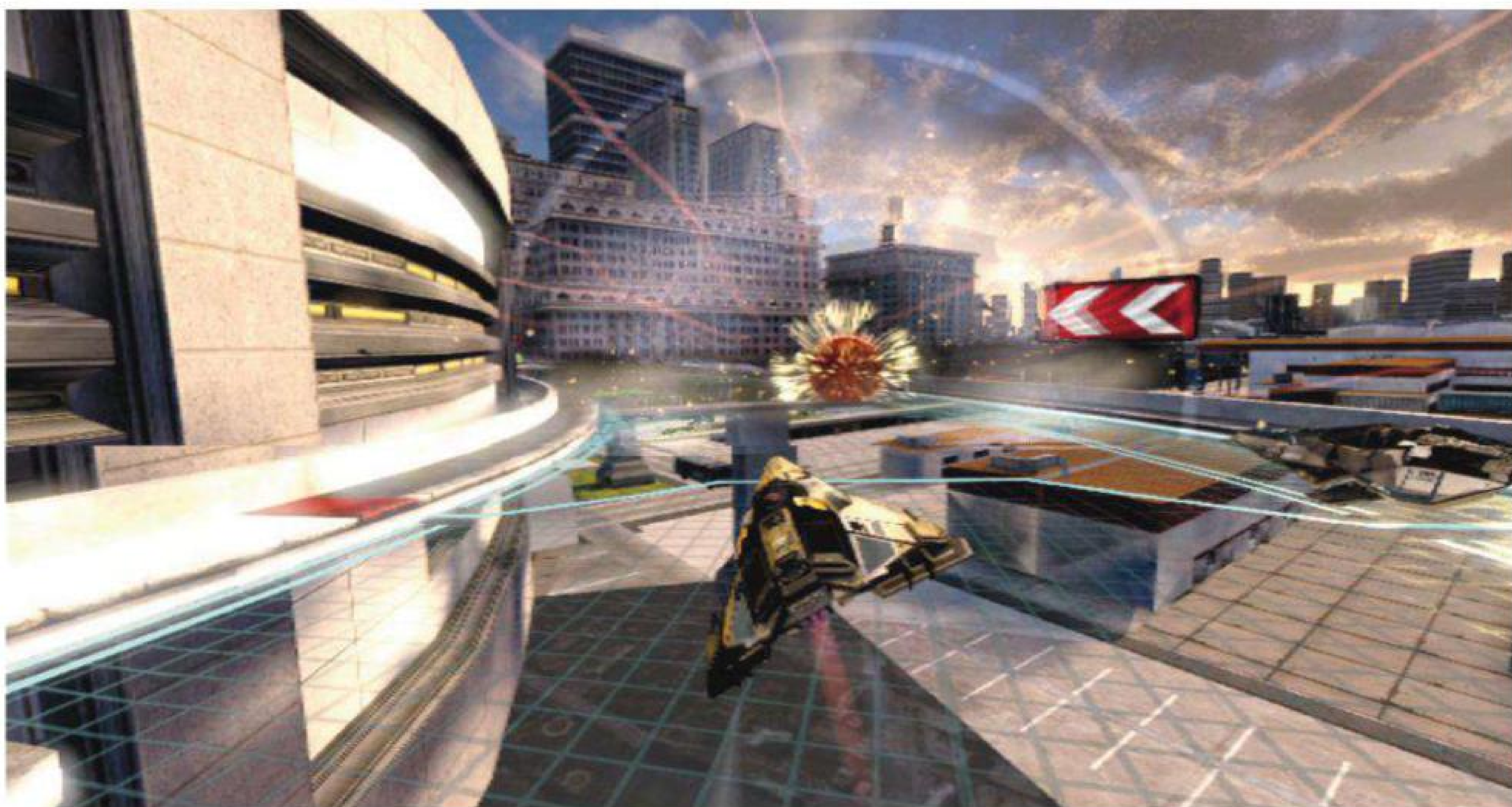
Ad Hoc play also features randomly assigned modes and tracks, offering voting options between sessions, but never handing full customisation over to hosts. The general lack of matchmaking options throughout is an interesting design choice, presumably intended to discourage power-hungry hosting, but it may also turn out to be a frustration for users looking to get a fix of a particular map and mode with friends. But Vita's Near certainly makes game hunting feel much more personal than trawling through lobbies, and it's therefore *2048* – of all the launch games – that most strongly hints at the handheld's online social potential.

Overall, then, *Wipeout 2048* shines brightest in the relative serenity of multiplayer, with four or fewer racers on the track. The blinkers on the online segment focus the experience further, channelling its thrills into unpredictable bite-size moments, and heightening the sense of achievement and reward.

Yes, *Wipeout 2048* conjures a less fanciful racing grid than we've seen previously, and it's also a less immaculate, less finessed racer than the home console iterations of the series we've played down the years. Instead, it's an attempt to try something new on the newest of platforms. While it may not offer something for everyone, when it flies, it soars.

8





LEFT Part of the *Wipeout* experience, alongside precision steering and weapon management, is looking good. Unlockable skins for ships can give you a stylistic edge over your opposition. **BELOW** Explosions and effects bring their own splashes of colour to the often vibrant stages. It's good they're beautiful, because *2048*'s emphasis on combat means you'll be seeing them frequently



ABOVE Empire Climb and SOL provide the best examples of Vita's polygon-pushing power. They also see *2048* at its most vertiginous, with previously towering structures becoming mere specks on a distant urban canvas



Post Script

Interview: the *Wipeout 2048* creative team explains how it reimagined the hovercraft racer

Game directors **Graeme Ankers** and **Stuart Tilley**, along with art director **Lee Carus**, saw *Wipeout 2048* through from inception to launch at SCE Studio Liverpool. They detail the philosophy behind bringing a bit of reality back to the brand.

Why did you choose the more grounded sci-fi flavour that pervades *Wipeout 2048*?
Graeme Ankers We wanted to do something different. *HD* and *Fury* had reached a sort of excellence in terms of what they could do in terms of design and aesthetic. [They were] almost the pinnacle of the sport, too, in terms of where *Wipeout* was and where it was going 200 years from now. We said, "OK, what would the start of the sport be like? Season one, race one." There's a whole rich area of the *Wipeout* universe we'd almost taken for granted and left it out there as assumed knowledge. As we do with a lot of things, we started with the visual side. We started with the aesthetic and it permeated all the way through.

Lee went about building this brave new world on top of the existing brownstone structures at street level, getting a sense of the depravity of the city. So when you get to the top of this world, it's where it'll eventually evolve to in *HD* and *Fury*. It also had a real [effect] on the gameplay; it wasn't just an art direction thing. We took the city-based approach to try some new types of gameplay, like widening the tracks – that was a big call to make early on. The emphasis was more on fighting than hitting blind corner after blind corner. Then we added the skill-cuts in to allow that kind of play: picking lines through the city.
Lee Carus Because of the approach, we've got a bit of both [near and distant sci-fi] in there. We've got the classic *Wipeout* look – sleek, smooth lines and futurism – but mixed in with architecture people can relate to. I remember when I first pitched the idea to the senior art team here. I came in with some rough paint-overs of New York, and within a few minutes [of discussion] the guys were buying into it in a big way. There's something in there for everyone now. Having more recognisable architecture will appeal to more people.


Graeme Ankers, game director


Stuart Tilley, game director


Lee Carus, art director

Did this approach get in the way of the technical aspects at all? What is the official framerate?
Stuart Tilley A rock-steady 30fps. We locked it down to 30 to make sure the gameplay wasn't affected. With more combat-style racing, more intense racing, you tend to have more ships onscreen than previous *Wipeouts*, and a lot closer [together]. There tends to be a little more going on. We decided if we could make a smooth 30fps, we knew the game would still be great to play and would allow us to [play around more] with the art style and effects. It's a trade: we could have tried for 60, but then have had to make a cut somewhere else. I think we made the right decision; it feels slick throughout, it's a competent 30. When you're jumping in and out is when you notice the framerate. I hope people who play it will see it's still pretty silky.

You've experimented with wider tracks before, most prominently in *Fusion* on PS2. What informed that decision? Was it a concession to casual players?
ST We didn't want the player to be bouncing around the track for the first few hours trying to master it. We wanted it to be straight in – getting wing-to-wing, blowing up the bad guys, trying different modes and having a really good time the moment they start the game. There's still some real challenge there as well, we haven't made it a casual game by any stretch of the imagination. We've actually got *Wipeout*'s fastest-ever speed class, Super Phantom, and it wouldn't have worked if the tracks weren't this wide. You've got that extreme challenge towards the back end of the game.

***Wipeout* has a fixed timeline. How did you tell the story of the series through track design?**
LC We still want people to realise that this is a real-world location – we have road markings, etc – but we wanted a strong delineation when you reached a piece of next-generation technology. The tracks are constructed around a living world – imagine these events have been constructed by engineers, like how when Monaco comes to town in F1; that's how we thought of it.

Why was multiplayer turned into a campaign?
GA One of the key philosophies was – and this is the first time we've had a campaign multiplayer – was to utilise Vita's connected, social potential. Not just one-off races online, but to build a full campaign, a full sense of a whole world of races going on outside of the singleplayer experience. The secondary objectives and agendas were a big part of that, and piping that information down to the frontend canvas menu so you're always in touch with your online players, you've always got those races going on. It's not all about winning – it can be about destroying someone's ship. The high-level philosophy was to push the challenge online, get people going online, fighting it out, and give incentives for those secondary objectives to build a really rich relationship with the online community.
ST One of the things we tried to do was get you online with objectives that didn't require you to be a 1,000-hour ninja from the get-go. Usually when you go online with a game it takes a long time to get into it; here you can be completing objectives from the first race. ■

Star Wars: The Old Republic

Star Wars: The Old Republic is an MMORPG that prioritises its RPG side over that MMO prefix. As such, BioWare has produced thousands of pages of backstory, and poured an unknowable amount of cash into voicing each and every story mission, side quest and snippet of incidental dialogue. The result is that *The Old Republic* provides a sense of personal belonging unmatched by almost any other MMOG. The galaxy far, far away feels welcoming, and it should: it's a place built entirely for you, the player. That's 'player', singular; no matter what your class is, you're the only hero who matters. Where other MMOGs show your existence as part of a wider ecosystem, BioWare shields you from it.

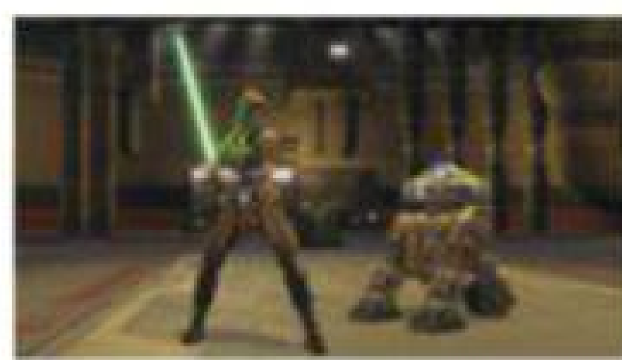
The game's galaxy – frozen some three-and-a-bit-thousand years before the films – is broken up into instances, with lifts and doors whisking shut behind players as they step into their own bubbles. Making your way from planet to planet involves walking alone to your berthed ship, clambering aboard, setting your course, climbing out, making your way through the docking bay and then arriving at your destination. Were it not for the general chat ticking away in the corner, at no point during that journey would you be aware you were sharing a server with thousands of other people.

Yet by making each player the centre of its universe, *The Old Republic* has gained a narrative backbone. Each class has its own three-act arc that planet-hops around the galaxy. These central 'class quests' stand up to light scrutiny against other solo RPGs, and they're 12 parsecs ahead of most MMOG questlines. The voices behind the main classes are equally memorable: the male bounty hunter is a man of few, gravelly words; the female trooper is efficient and action-oriented. While most MMOGs leave characterisation to the player, *The Old Republic* projects its characters outwards at you.

Scope for defining your character, however, comes in shaping their moral code. Here, that code is often binary: sometimes you'll get an ethical conundrum – the Jedi outlaw love, for example, making any potential trysts you spot inherently naughty – but you'll usually be choosing between good and comically nasty. Your choices pay out in dark or light side points, rewarding you with access to gear later on. Choose a path of grey areas and you'll be left floundering in the middle. Playing that unknown quantity isn't game-destroying – you still get loot – but it's obvious that the morality BioWare is peddling is Star Wars' black-and-white version. And while *The Old Republic*'s galaxy has to remain mostly static to work as an MMOG, the impact of your choices becomes apparent in the game's four-person 'flashpoints'. In these gatherings, players share everything, including conversations, and a random roll system means each of you has equal opportunities to chime in and redirect the path of a mission, making these repeatable quests narratively engaging.

Publisher EA
Developer BioWare
Format PC
Release Out now

The galaxy far, far away feels welcoming, and it should: it's a place built entirely for you, the player



JEDI MINE TRICK
The Old Republic's crafting system is deceptively simple – send your companion off on missions that take real time and return item rewards – but it strokes that part of your cortex that likes getting something for seemingly nothing. Having Khem Val, nightmarish monster man, pop back from a six-minute jaunt with a new idea for a hat is always enjoyable. There's a neat complication, too: select three skills that tie together and you can act as one-crew sweatshop, first digging for, then refining, then turning found materials into saleable goodies.

Conversations invariably lead to combat, which is the same stylised skill bar manipulation as seen in the majority of *The Old Republic*'s MMOG peers. To genre newcomers, the concepts of ability management and rotation are quickly off-putting, and the game does little to make battles more comprehensible for non-natives. Skill trees are riddled with arcane language: preexisting concepts such as pushbacks and cooldowns are combined with new ways to measure damage and delivered without cipher. Experienced MMOG players won't find anything to trouble them here, but given the game's massmarket appeal and solo-play friendliness, a little more transparency would be appreciated.

Even with a weight of MMOG experience under your belt, some of the foibles of combat can frustrate. For healers, targeting correctly can be nightmarish. Some attacks suffer from a muted animation, too, making their effects difficult to discern in the midst of battle. The inquisitor's Affliction talent, for instance, starts as a tiny ball of shadowy grey smoke, and coats the target in a hard-to-spot miasma. But most talents are loud, brash, and easy to spot – an inquisitor specialising in lightning attacks, say, launches great arcing bolts of flickering energy at enemies.

The game's classes are surprisingly distinct, too. The eight on offer have been split into analogous pairings across the two factions, but specialisation is encouraged from level ten. Thus the imperial agent can become either a sniper or an operative build, each with an obvious purpose: long-range damage for the sniper, healing for the operative. What's more, the three skill trees mean you're free to make a backstabbing operative with access to emergency medical supplies, or a sniper who can control an army of tiny robots while hiding behind a bin. It's a setup that means almost all group makeups are viable for joint quests.

And playing as a group is the best way to see the game, enabling you to dip in and out of the bespoke cutscenes your class choice wouldn't otherwise get to watch. Conversely, hit the grind treadmill too hard – you're looking at upwards of five solid days of playtime to hit the level cap of 50 – and *The Old Republic*'s charm is lost, the stories spun out by voiceovers dissipating against the orders to kill another 25 somethings.

BioWare hasn't cast itself as a guerrilla movement trying to subvert the MMOG with *The Old Republic*. Instead it's been the Empire, working to produce a slick, gigantic experience that, in the time of free-to-play, feels polished enough to demand monthly fees. How long this empire – vast and imposing, but archaic in structure – will last in the face of newer MMOGs and their rebellious payment models isn't easy to discern. This isn't the first of a new order of MMORPG, but it may well be the last of the old.

8



RIGHT Space missions are available as soon as you get your ship, and play at sub-*Star Fox* level. They're not particularly engaging, but pick up the relevant daily quests from your ship's nav computer and they pay out in fat chunks of experience. BELOW Most of the time, *The Old Republic* isn't as pretty as its singleplayer peers. But if you take a moment during questing to tilt the camera upwards, you'll often be rewarded with an impressive vista





ABOVE Some races are split by faction – the blind, force-strong Miraluka are reserved for the Republic, while the russet-coloured pureblood Sith are confined to the Empire – and some are also limited to a particular class



Conversations work like they do in *Mass Effect*, giving you a wheel of responses to choose from. Mouse over the options to see an icon indicating whether a choice is a dark or light action



The Old Republic **has a glitz rarely seen in fresh MMORPGs, but it's founded on mechanics that were set down years ago**

Post Script

The light and dark sides of relying on MMOG convention

For those unversed in the conventions of the MMOG genre, *The Old Republic* presents a high barrier to entry that's entirely at odds with its IP's broad appeal. Characters skate along the surface of an immutable game world. Dead enemies have replacements phased in to prowl the same streets their immediate predecessors failed to protect. Crippling myopia afflicts all: NPCs only raise a blaster in anger if you step within half-hearted spitting radius of them. And pushed up against its offline action peers, *The Old Republic* in full flow looks stilted and artificial. While the former reward button jabs with immediate and kinetic actions, *The Old Republic*'s attacks sit along a hotbar, are activated with number key presses, and are usually subject to some kind of cooldown. BioWare's game, for all its newness, is still bound by MMOG conventions.

It's claimed genetic traits sometimes skip a generation, but not so for MMOGs, whose designers have seemingly agreed to freeze their development around the concepts thrown up by pen-and-paper roleplaying games. The holy trinity of player classes – healer, pain-absorbing 'tank', and damage-dealing 'DPS' – are utterly integral to the genre. They appear again in *The Old Republic*, varying subtly in possible approach. For instance, tanking classes now use ranged attacks over melee ones, but this simply means standing a bit farther away.

This kind of ancestor worship perpetuates design decisions that may alienate novice MMOG players. The most obvious of these is in player vs player (PvP) combat. Huttball – a murderous version of rugby – is obtuse, arcane, and over-deep. The winning team has to hustle a ball over their opposition's goal line, the first to six winning the bout. But whoever's carrying the ball is the immediate focal point of ten other characters – from 16 different advanced classes, each with access to three skill trees – all hurling attacks, slows, control moves, buffs, debuffs and heals.

The ancient tropes are also found in solitary or small-group pursuits. The quest design underpinning *The Old Republic*'s thickly layered story is largely uncomplicated, often asking you to kill 15 wotsits, pick up five thingies, and bring them back to Sergeant whatshisface. This familiar feeling can even be compounded by the spikes of excitement delivered during the moments of high drama in the game's story-centric sections. Where *World Of Warcraft* undersold its quests with a block of easily skipped text, *The Old Republic*'s voice-acted characters outpouring grandiose words about the glorious journey you're about to head on in order to kill ten space rats can sometimes expose the grind in a harsher light. The things BioWare has bolted onto the MMOG template add little mechanically, too: class quests are regular quests with much better presentation, and space missions are shooting gallery distractions at best.

And they won't last forever. At level 50, the new story content dries up (to be augmented later, we presume). Cut loose from fresh narrative elements, players are left with only the old MMOG mechanics to rely on for enjoyment. But even after all these years, this bedrock of familiar quests and class systems is enough to hold your attention. The rhythms of killing, looting and levelling still exert a vice-like grip on the human brain, and fatigue with the formula fades into memory when your character is surrounded by the cheerful holographic ding of a new level earned. Would you keep playing without this positive reinforcement? And would you keep playing together without those established class roles? MMOGs haven't changed partly because they've become so successful at tapping into the lizard brains of players, and to switch approach now could be commercial suicide. *The Old Republic*'s major innovation – story – is a classy varnish, but chipped away it reveals a solid substance underneath. ■

Uncharted: Golden Abyss

More than most heroes in gaming, twinkly eyed matinee idol Nathan Drake was made for the big screen. His adventures beg for the IMAX treatment just to wring every possible drop of drama from each collapsing staircase, exploding vehicle and vertiginous leap. So can the *Uncharted* franchise survive the untheatrical confines of a handheld, or is Drake's appeal rooted in dramatic scripting backed up by formidable technical power and expertise?

The truth is, when held up against its PS3 peers, *Uncharted: Golden Abyss* can't help seeming a bit straight-to-DVD. The epic, rolling set-pieces of *Among Thieves* and *Drake's Deception* won't be found here; there are no death-defying train rides or capsizing cargo ships, and certainly no moments spent free-falling from the back of a plane. Things do fall apart in *Golden Abyss*, but they do so one piece at a time – the scale is smaller and the environments are more static.

That doesn't make them any less visually arresting, and there are plenty of locations that will have you scrutinising your Vita's display with all the awed wonder of Drake examining a priceless archaeological find. *Golden Abyss*'s Central American jaunt takes in the usual array of temples at sunset and ruins at dawn, with plenty of long-forgotten underground caverns connecting the two. Sony Bend shies away from attempting the urban environments of Naughty Dog's most recent games, however, and offers nothing you haven't seen before in their place. But it's a marvel to hold all this beauty in your hands nonetheless.

The cast isn't quite as convincing as its bigger-screen counterpart – faces seem less animated, movements slightly more stiff – although the detail on Drake's dirt-flecked cheeks has made it across intact. The story these characters tell is less gripping, too, lacking a strong sense of direction from the off. The problem is compounded by a weak villain who lacks either the bone-evil threat of Lazarevic in *Among Thieves* or the mystery of Marlowe in *Drake's Deception*. And while the historical puzzle that Drake and new girl Marisa Chase attempt to unravel is genuinely intriguing, it's also convoluted enough that you'll find yourself subjected to a little too much exposition along the way. Nolan North remains dependably charming as the voice of Drake, however, and there are enough twists and turns to see you through to the game's conclusion.

But even if *Golden Abyss* suffers in comparison to the astonishingly high production standards of the PS3 titles, it holds up on its own as an action game. It's a pity to discover that Naughty Dog's two sequels' worth of refinements to the core combat mechanics haven't made it across – forget riot shields, gas canisters and tossing back grenades here – but *Golden Abyss* does make use of Vita's motion and touch controls to define a combat style of its own.

Publisher SCE
Developer In-house (Bend Studio)
Format Vita
Release Out now (Japan), February 22 (EU, US)

Golden Abyss makes use of Vita's motion and touch controls to define a combat style of its own



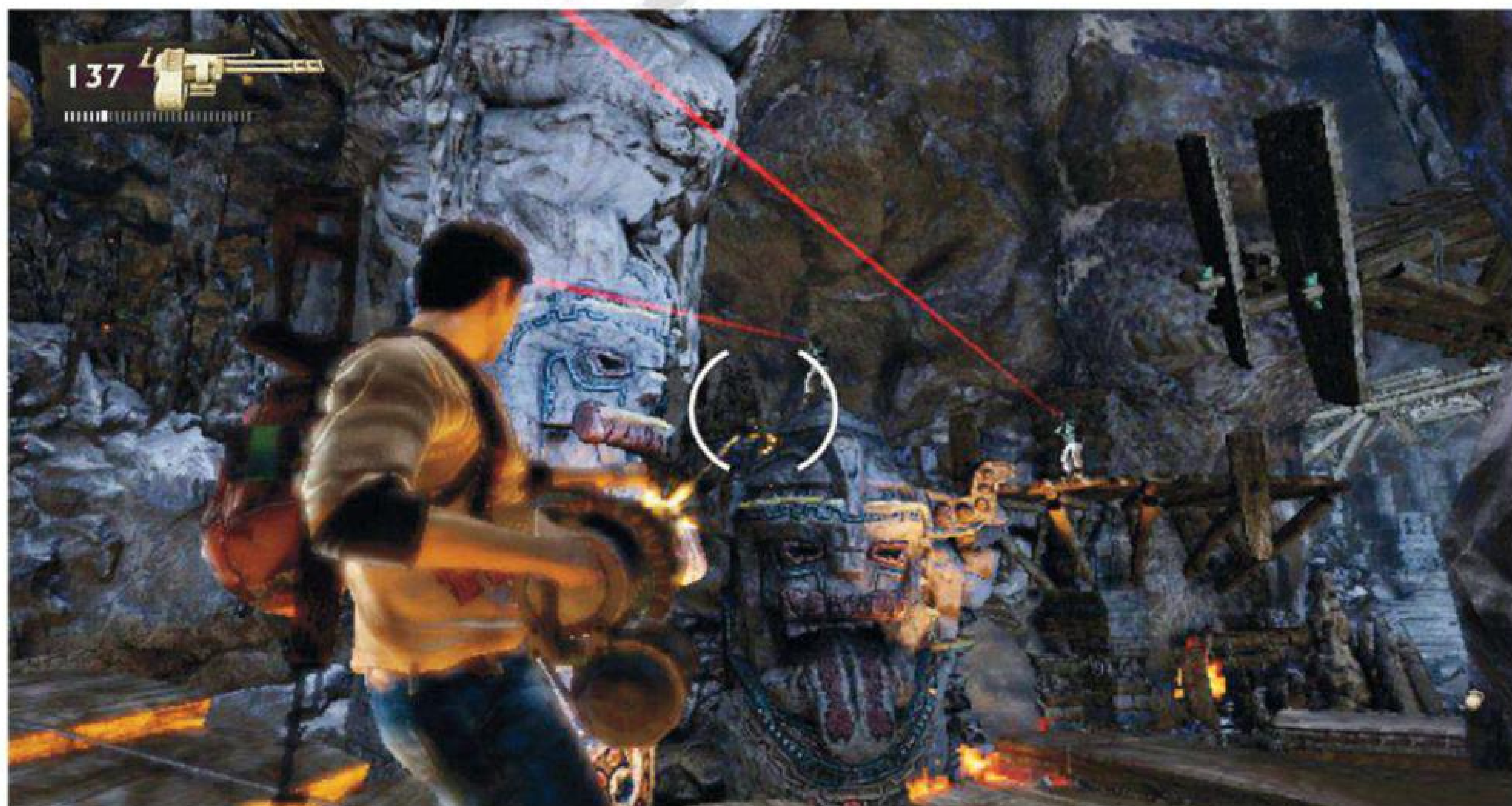
The combination of analogue and gyroscopic aiming feels near-perfect, offering a subtle touch of finely granulated control that should persuade even the most long-standing motion-control sceptic of its uses. Vita's analogue sticks are reliable, sure, but for a quick headshot it's often easier to slightly tilt the unit than risk nudging the reticule a centimetre too far. With default controls, lining up a sniper scope on your target relies entirely on the gyroscope (with touchscreen or touchpad swipes adjusting zoom), and quickly becomes second nature. Grenades, meanwhile, can be dragged and dropped exactly where they're needed, while directional prompts add an unpredictable QTE element to hand-to-hand combat.

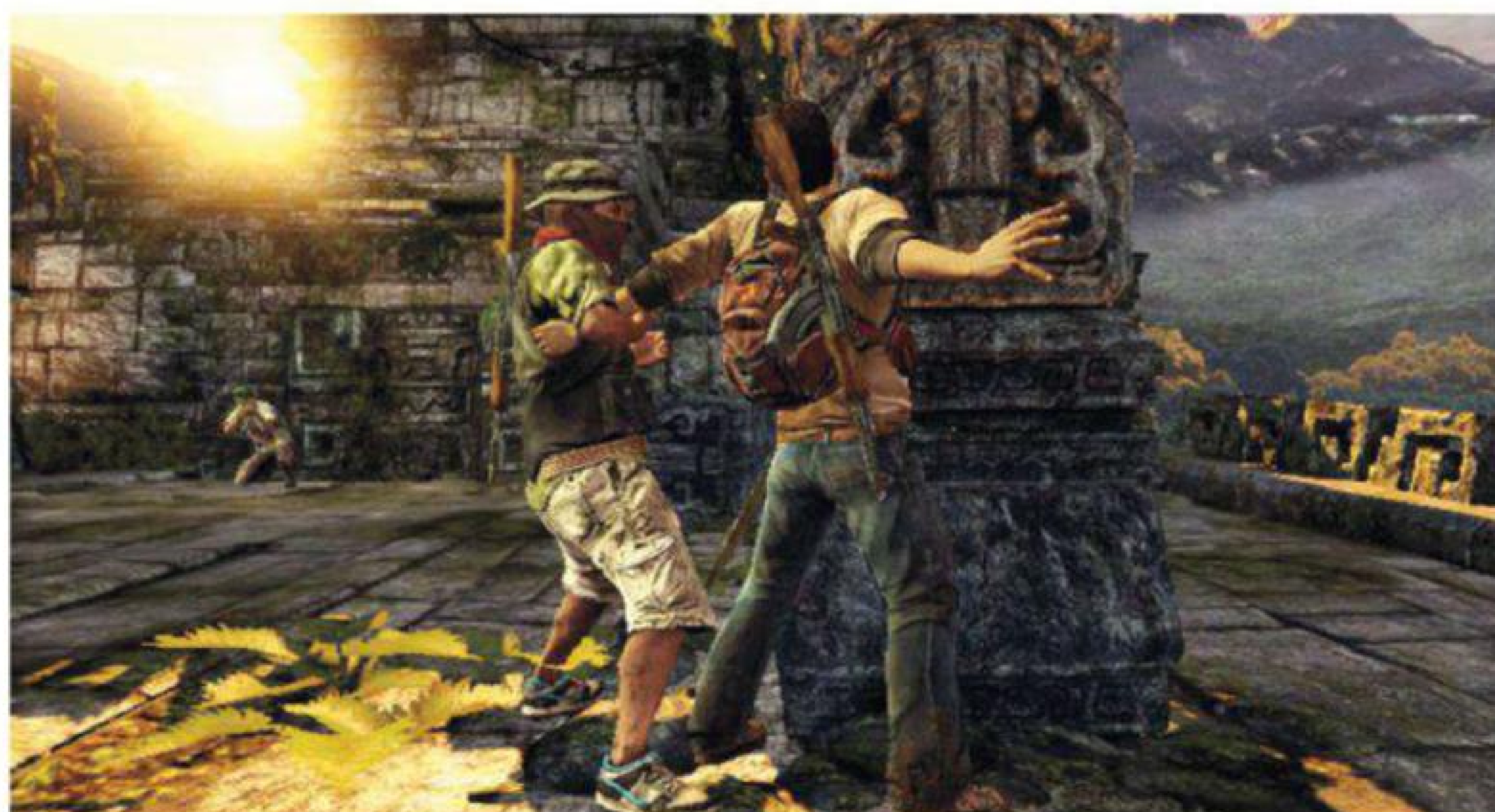
Slightly less successful are *Golden Abyss*'s navigation controls. Tracing the route you want Drake to take when scaling ruins works reliably, but has the effect of making the experience seem semi-automated. That said, more of those directional prompts mean that moments when handholds crumble to dust rise beyond just a scripted thrill – the player has to join Drake in making a sudden grab for purchase.

If the touchscreen implementation stopped there, *Golden Abyss* would perfectly showcase what Vita's new control methods can bring to traditional games. Unfortunately, it also repeats a handful of chore-like touchscreen puzzles. Making charcoal rubbings certainly adds a hint of practical archaeology to *Uncharted*'s gung-ho treasure hunting, but it's just wiping your finger across the screen. And cleaning the dirt off discovered artefacts would simply be more of the same were it not for the fact you have to awkwardly rotate the object with the rear touchpad at the same time. But at least these tasks can be performed with the minimum of engagement – a repeated jigsaw puzzle (Drake seems to stumble upon a great many torn-up documents in this adventure) manages to be that painful combination of both unexciting and mildly taxing. More traditional puzzles work better, but there's still nothing like *Drake's Deception*'s room of shadows.

Take away the set-pieces, take away the scale, take away the regular writers and most of the supporting cast, and what's left? Well, there's Drake, who still has more charm in his trigger finger than the majority of games' thick-necked leads in their entire bruising frames. There's also the beauty of *Uncharted*'s exotic locales, which act as a great showcase for Vita's astonishing display. And even if *Golden Abyss* starred a power-armoured space marine fighting his way across the cardboard-box planet, it would still be a robust thirdperson shooter, the likes of which we've simply never seen on a handheld. The core *Uncharted* experience is still here, in other words. It's stripped a little bare, but it's just about enough.

7





ABOVE Some characters just look right when lugging a minigun around. Master Chief is one, Marcus Fenix is another. Drake is not one of them. It doesn't stop the gun producing results, however

LEFT Touchscreen-based combat works when integrated into an average gunfight, but a couple of QTE-heavy boss encounters take the concept a little too far





RIGHT It's slightly easier to pick out climbable surfaces than in the PS3 instalments – they're painted brighter colours, and inconsistently sport an eye-catching gleam effect that reminds us of Ninja Theory's *Enslaved*

The Darkness II

At first, *The Darkness II* feels more like a stylistic reboot than a straight sequel. With development duties passed from Starbreeze to *Dark Sector* studio Digital Extremes, the first order of business has been to replace the original's grimy aesthetic with a cel-shaded look more faithful to its comic-book source material. Faces are better animated, their features more pronounced, and everything's outlined in thick strokes of ink; you'd be forgiven for feeling that if you're playing a sequel to anything, it's Ubisoft's *XIII*. It's a striking change, but just the first and most obvious way in which *The Darkness II* differs from its forebear.

It's been nearly five years since the original, and shooters have changed a great deal in the interim. *Call Of Duty*'s dominance cannot be ignored, and hasn't been: its control scheme and much of its weaponry are invoked here, as is its multiplayer mode's barrage of onscreen text after kills. Activision's shooter has also lowered the bar for campaign length, and Digital Extremes has duly served up an eight-hour singleplayer carrying barely an ounce of fat. But the biggest change is that this is an action game through and through.

In the original, protagonist Jackie Estacado's demonic shoulder-mounted tentacles were sometimes used for stealth, to foresee danger and to deal with it from a distance. Now they're instruments of death and death alone. A tap of the right bumper produces a quick, horizontal slash, two of which will do for most enemies. The left tentacle can be used to grab and throw objects; pick up weapons, ammo, and trinkets; and destroy doors. This initially basic moveset can be expanded over time through a skill tree that's accessed from mid-level shrines, with new abilities purchased using the 'dark essence' acquired from kills. The more creative the kill, the more essence awarded. It's similar to *Bulletstorm*, but a far simpler version of that system, with no combo meter and no penalty for repeating the same tricks.

Eventually, Estacado can channel The Darkness to greatly increase bullet damage, and deploy a demonic swarm to disorient enemies. But it doesn't end there: grab a stunned enemy and tap one of the face buttons to drain health, steal ammo, or conjure a shield or black hole from the Darkness. Moments such as these add variety, require quick thinking (foes keep shooting as they dangle in front of you), and provide a respite from the chaos as a canned animation of the tentacles doing their visceral work plays out, with Estacado immune from damage until all the squelching is over.

In terms of the fiction behind all this bloodshed, Estacado has managed to keep his unholy powers at bay during the two years since the first game's events, but soon reawakens them following the appearance of the Brotherhood – a shadowy organisation that was the original keeper of the Darkness and fancies it back. Estacado's spent the intervening period grieving the loss of his childhood sweetheart, Jenny, who was murdered in the previous game before his eyes.

Publisher 2K Games
Developer Digital Extremes
Format 360 (version tested), PS3, PC
Release Out now

It's genuinely discomfiting as you try to parse reality from flashbacks from hallucinations conjured by the Darkness



MADE MEN
The game's multiplayer offering is Vendettas mode, a standalone campaign that's playable in co-op or even offline on your own. A series of shootouts and boss fights linked by cutscenes, the narrative runs in parallel to that of the main game, with a welcome focus on the manic Powell. Players are cast as one of four characters, each with their own powers, but none comes close to Estacado's demonic limbs. This means an increased focus on basic gunplay, which dilutes the appeal, and the mode quickly becomes stale, given there's no option to switch character between levels.

She may be dead, but Estacado's inability to let go means Jenny reappears in hallucinatory flashbacks. Returning comic-book writer Paul Jenkins pens an intricate tale that flits between reality, the Jenny flashbacks and repeated visits to a mental hospital, where Estacado's a patient and his mob underlings take on the roles of doctors, orderlies and fellow inmates, with Jenny cast as a nurse. It's a genuinely discomfiting experience as you try to parse reality from flashbacks from Darkness-conjured hallucinations. The one constant is Johnny Powell, who's equally manic in real life as he is in the mental hospital, all bulging eyes and flailing arms and conspiracy theories. He's the maddest man in the game, but also the most in the know. In the few quiet moments, smart, sporadic use of licensed music lends real-world credence to the ultraviolent, supernatural fantasy that pervades elsewhere.

It's fortunate that the storytelling's smart, because everything else about *The Darkness II* is earnestly dumb. While Estacado and the Darkness are pleasures to control, there's little strategy to the combat: you use assault rifles or SMGs from range, and shotguns or tentacles up close, with only the presence of power-sapping light forcing a change of tack. The latter requires a degree of forward planning in shooting out streetlights, destroying generators and, later on, smart reactions to avoid the Darkness-savvy Brotherhood's torches, flashbangs and vehicles with full-beam headlights. Enemies get tougher – whip wielders can disarm you from range, others can teleport up close or behind you – but there's little to stop you ploughing through the game using proven tactics.

It's also cringeworthy at times thanks to your Darkling accomplice, a demon with the skin of a cat on his head and a Union Jack across his chest, presumably to confirm his intended nationality despite his Antipodean tone. He urinates on fallen enemies, utters an endless stream of mockney filth, and calls you 'monkey'. You can kill him, but he keeps coming back.

Yet there's an awful lot to like. Weedy SMGs aside, the gunplay is rock solid, and your evolving Darkness powers encourage experimentation, elevating what would otherwise be a rote shooter. And while the screenshots suggest a hyper-violent fantasy take on the well-worn Mafia tale, *The Darkness II* is a love story at its core. Estacado doesn't seek mob dominance, the death of the Brotherhood, or victory over the Darkness: his every act is motivated by the loss of the love of his life, and his desire to see her rest in peace, so that he can find it too. It's derivative, gratuitous and needlessly profane, but beneath the gruesome veneer lies a tale of – believe it or not – genuine tenderness. **7**





ABOVE Much has been made of quad-wielding, but sticking to one firearm is more effective, freeing up the left trigger and allowing you to aim down the sights. Dual-wielders do get the benefit of generous aim assist, though





ABOVE You'll spend a lot of time gazing at hapless goons dangling in front of you while you decide which of the four executions is of greater benefit to you. The canned animations that follow quickly become repetitive, however.
LEFT This would be a much poorer game without Jenny, and Paul Jenkins has done a fine job of making her relevant. A fairground flashback, and a touching moment after the credits, come close to matching the romantic high of the original's touching sofa scene

Kingdoms Of Amalur: Reckoning

Much has been said about *Kingdoms Of Amalur*'s 10,000-year backstory, concocted by fantasy author RA Salvatore to act as a springboard for 38 Studios' future projects. The result of all his efforts is that the world of Amalur comes steeped in lore, with NPCs spouting out a wiki's worth of info for even the most innocuous 'kill *x* rats' task. It's certainly as comprehensive as any virtual history in recent memory, and yet arrives in a game intent on cutting through the RPG fat, presenting a more accessible take on the open-world RPG. How do you present an unforgiving fiction in a forgiving world?

What arrives on shop shelves is an epic RPG with a user-friendly pick-up-and-play ethos. This most obviously manifests itself in the responsive player character. If you've hacked and slashed a bloody path through *God Of War*, you won't need any introduction to *Reckoning*'s combination of button mashing, evasive dodges and timed parries. That each weapon is limited to one button prevents complexity but welcomes experimentation – equip a new weapon and you're only a few prods away from mastering it. Combat isn't deep, but it is wide, thanks to multiple weapon classes and the mountains of loot within them.

That your barbarian/rogue/wizard wouldn't feel out of place in a straight thirdperson action game is a real achievement, especially following *Skyrim*'s weightless avatars. The game it most closely resembles is *Fable II* – Lionhead's own attempt to tame the excesses of the RPG. But in the light of this, *Fable II* lacked combat conviction; *Reckoning* is tougher and it hits harder. Amalur's varied bestiary provides a blend of short- and long-range combat rhythms, and some suitably visceral feedback – the slow-motion clang of sword on shield, the gruesome hiss of arterial spray – that lends the game a full-blooded energy.

Of course, lowering the barriers to entry can also negate the gratification felt from the obstacles you overcome. Ranged combat, for example, employs an auto-aim that removes all the skill from the player. So while bows and projectile-spewing staves work well enough as secondary support to a stabbing implement, they are deeply unsatisfying in themselves. It doesn't help that target switching is mapped to the right analogue stick, which is nigh-on impossible to reach in tandem with the face buttons. In a way, *Reckoning* reverses *Skyrim*'s dilemma: where the firstperson perspective struggles to mesh well with hand-to-hand duels, it is the true home of projectiles.

Reckoning never quite balances accessibility with the depth expected from an RPG either. Systems are present and correct – smithing, alchemy, sagecrafting (think: *Elder Scrolls*' soul gems) – but are streamlined into neat little asides. There are too few collectible components to sell these crafts as organic parts of the Amalurian ecosystem. Where *Skyrim*'s alchemists have to root around in the countryside in search of mystic barks, their counterparts in Amalur need only walk up to shiny pick-ups dotting the world. This is roleplaying for a thunderously dull imagination.

Publisher EA
Developer 38 Studios/Big Huge Games
Format 360 (tested), PC, PS3
Release Out now

Part of the appeal of an RPG is losing yourself, which is impossible if the entire game is a deliberately beaten track



Worse, this streamlining and simplifying is felt in the very geography of the place. Like *Fable*'s Albion, Amalur is a colossal landmass that's been divided into manageable chunks. With its connecting corridors and invisible walls, there's an artificiality to the world that simply can't compete with the organic sprawl of locations such as Tamriel. At the same time, the self-contained structure allows the game's artists to conjure a visual mix that would jar in one cohesive whole. Moving from murky bog to verdant forest palaces to lurid red desert captures a sense of adventurous scale, which is more important than pure acreage.

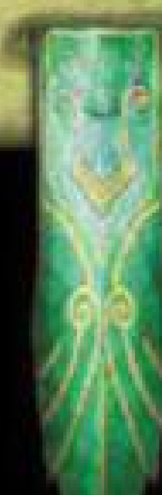
Amalur's problem, like so many ideas in *Reckoning*, is its refusal to ask too much of the player. Clarity should be championed – in interface, control and item management – but not to the extent that the world is laid bare. Part of the appeal of RPGs is losing yourself in a virtual place, which is impossible if the entire game is a deliberately beaten track. For these reasons, Amalur is a very easy world to drop in and out of – if only *Skyrim* were so willing to share us with our real lives – but it is never a place where we can truly put down roots. And all this is a shame, since Salvatore's encyclopaedic creation is something worth investing in.

Ultimately, it is the fiction most poorly served by the game. Could mechanical immediacy ever be a natural fit for an RPG of this size? Combat is mastered in an hour, but is tasked with holding the player's attention for upwards of 50. So *Reckoning*'s appeal soon wanes, if only due to aching ligaments. And pushing combat to the fore is a disservice to the storytelling. Beyond a flimsy stealth attack, our hero's vocabulary consists of 'hack' and 'slash', limiting the anecdotes he can tell. Slathering on lore and backstory gives killing a fun context, but no amount of preamble can freshen up another identikit dungeon with a texture reskin.

Tellingly, the game is as its best when questing serves the lore. Visiting the gnome capital, for example, shifts the focus to political intrigue as you serve the machinations of small schemers with big ambitions. An even better strand has heroes enacting famous elfin stories, ensuring their history replays as written. As each tale is completed you assume the character's identity, slowly ascending the ranks of elvish royalty. At its heart, *Reckoning* is an interesting tale about disrupting cyclical fate – ironic, considering the game's largely repetitive nature – and when the story gets to shine, 38 Studios and Big Huge Games' friendlier design presents a welcome change of pace.

6





LEFT The major downside of Amalur's extensive lore is the humourless performances used to deliver it. NPCs stand rigidly before you, spouting out fact after fact in one of ten or so faux-British voices. BELOW 'Fate shifting' finishers add a satisfyingly cinematic farewell moment to combat. Each enemy type gets their own takedown, ranging from axes in the belly to head-crushing hammer blows





ABOVE Combat takes a leaf out of *Fable II*'s book by mapping each of the disciplines to an individual button. Special abilities, such as a charged sword thrust or a barrage of arrows, require a held button press to charge



NeverDead

Publisher Konami
Developer Rebellion
Format 360, PS3
Release Out now

After the thirdperson cover shooter revolution – which left roadie runs and crouching behind walls reigning supreme – it's both refreshing and jarring to dive into *NeverDead*'s world of old-fashioned open-air mayhem. The running and gunning might be scrappy and anachronistic, but it's a game brimming with oddball ideas, and moving too fast to care about its rough edges. Designed by *Metal Gear Acid* and Konami veteran Shinta Nojiri at UK-based developer Rebellion, it largely ignores contemporary genre norms in favour of its unique conceit: the main character, gruff demon hunter Bryce, can't die. He can, however, be torn limb from limb by his hellish foes.

This byproduct of immortality is central to combat. Lose an arm and you can keep firing with the other as the stray limb goes zipping around the room. Better yet, intentionally throw an arm away and watch enemies chase it like dogs after a bone. If you want your missing limbs back, dive-roll into them and they'll handily reattach to Bryce's body, ready to be used once more. Puzzles are few and far between, but they usually require you to pop Bryce's head off and roll it into hard-to-reach areas (you can also regenerate Bryce's body when a meter fills back up). These are just a few examples of *NeverDead*'s lively experimentation around a potentially macabre theme. It's a game that revels in quirky, silly thrills, an antidote for those now jaded by the onslaught of sci-fi epics that take themselves – and their mythologies – a little bit too seriously.

If the joys of everlasting life seem like they would soon pall, however, Rebellion is aware of the need to add a level of threat that stops *NeverDead* from simply being a shooter with a constantly enabled God mode. So if Bryce gets his head swallowed up by the Grandbaby enemy type, it's game over; and you'll also be banished back to the last checkpoint if your sidekick/minder Arcadia dies. The Grandbabies – little white giggling balls of rolling evil – are at your heels every step of the way, adding more urgency as you scramble to fit Bryce back together again. And if you do find yourself gulped down by one of these Kirby-esque foes, you'll be given one last shot at life via a brief QTE.

The XP you earn and collect along the way can be used to purchase new abilities at any time, although you're given a limited number of slots to populate with skills that, for example, can turn limbs into grenades or initiate a state of slow motion when you're about to be hit. The slot limit is intended to add a layer of strategic thinking to all the shooting and diving, but simply forces you to manically shuffle abilities around to suit the situation. Abilities such as aim lock for targeting airborne enemies are vital, and when combined with the drip feed of weapons (all capable of being dual-wielded), add depth to what is otherwise a shallow game loop. Progression is all about clearing areas of demonic nasties before eventually taking on one of the game's colourful, extravagant bosses. Unusual as some of the monsters are (the fluorescent 'Hippo' is a recurring highlight), there's a distinct sense that Nojiri has bitten off more than the game engine can chew, resulting in framerate lurches and the AI bungling around, chasing its own tail. Bugs are a frequent nuisance, too, with some dodgy collision detection that can partly be attributed to the sheer amount of onscreen activity. The action includes not just foes, but environments that can be blown to bits by your attacks, sending walls, pillars and all sorts of detailed debris crumbling onto enemies. It's often all too much to take in, and the AI's tendency to smash up the place (intentionally or not) can lead to some frustratingly chaotic battles.

Lose an arm and you can keep firing with the other as the stray limb zips around the room



Then there's the closing act. While it ups the ante in scale as you battle through a city in ruins towards an über-demon's lair, it stumbles in its balancing. Suddenly, *NeverDead* shifts from casual shooter to unforgiving taskmaster, asking you to juggle an assault of all enemy types, a rush of bosses, and, not least of all, the trick of trying to keep Bryce in one piece.

Despite its flaws, *NeverDead* keeps your attention as the bizarre plot flits between flashbacks to Bryce's origin and his present-day job as a demon hunter. The origin strand of *NeverDead's* story is more affecting and well-plotted than you'd expect from a game with such a schlocky vibe, too. The flashbacks to Bryce's early, pre-immortality years reveal a clean-cut hero on a mission to vanquish the evil demon king Astaroth. Having offed Bryce's partner, Astaroth forces our hero to wallow in mourning for eternity, hence his inability to welcome death with open arms. It sounds trite, but it resonates strongly as you witness present-day Bryce, all snark and sneer, contrasted with his former valiant, hopeful self.

The otherworldly invaders plaguing the city inevitably tie the past and present narratives together and there's a healthy amount of comedy in the script that's sadly let down by low-brow sexism (reinforced by a cutscene camera with a penchant for cleavage and low-angle shots of women's behinds). The overall tone is somewhere between 2000AD (Rebellion nods to Judge Dredd through in-game magazines and posters) and Mike Mignola's Hellboy. Though it never quite reaches the quality – in script or style – of either, Nojiri has introduced a grizzled protagonist who stands out regardless of familiar subject matter.

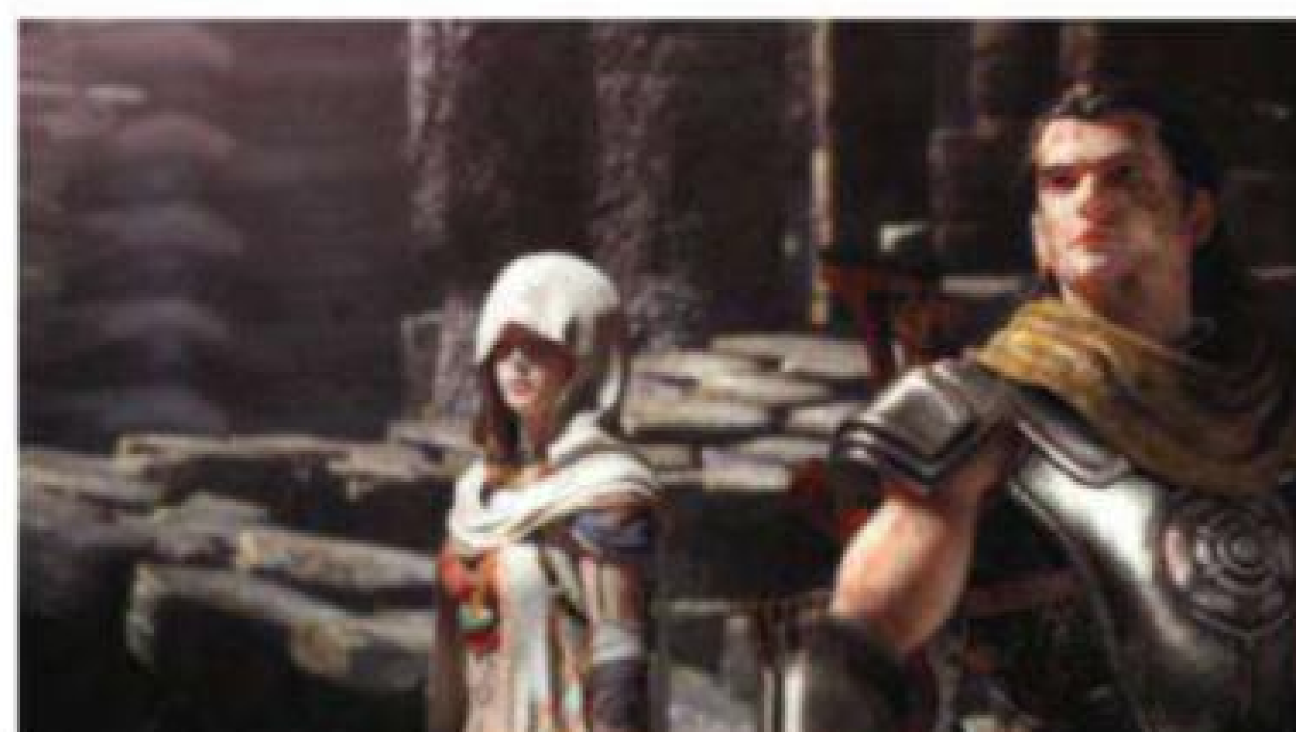
NeverDead may have issues, then, but it should be commended for innovating in a genre muddied by wannabes without the confidence to experiment with the shooter's ever-cloned DNA. In the end, *NeverDead*'s heart is in the right place: committed to entertaining you, no matter the cost – even if it means losing your head a few too many times along the way.

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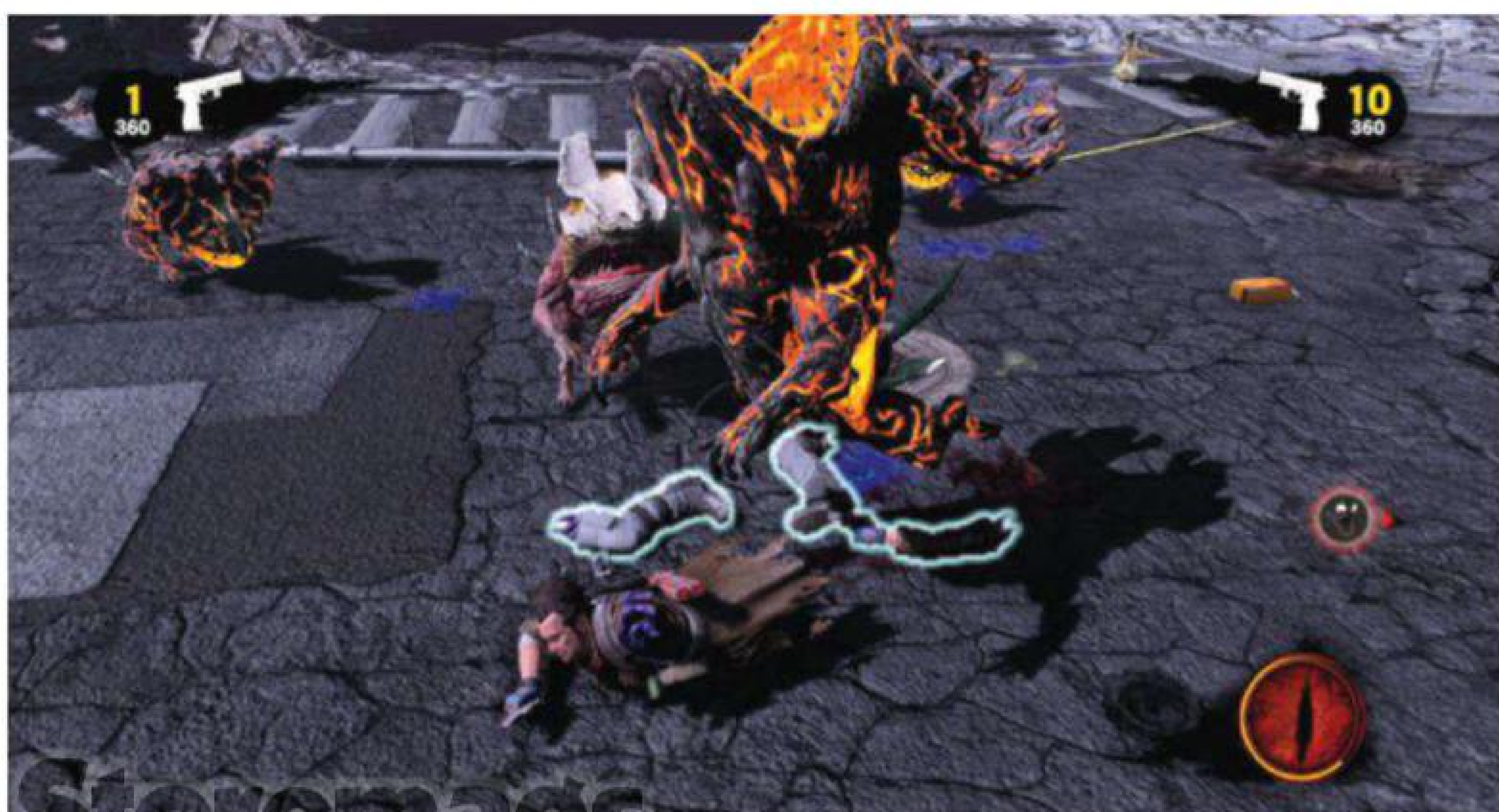
Bryce and his minder, Arcadia (left), become tangled up in a demonic plot to kidnap pop star Nikki Summerfield (centre). The starlet's squeamishness is exploited for laughs at every possible turn





ABOVE The young, clean-cut and intentionally heroic Bryce is a tall measure of a man. That's especially apparent when contrasted with the haggard, scarred, cynical and rather sexist Bryce of his five-millennia-old later self

ABOVE The designers occasionally throw in a delightful-looking vista, but the bulk of the game takes place in dark and dreary city interiors. Still, from a mental asylum to a police station and, eventually, the big bad demon's lair, there's variety to *NeverDead*'s take on the world. Though there are missteps, such as a blackout in the sewers, the game has a cohesive look, falling between Gothic fantasy and reality. RIGHT Once you've been munched on by one of the colourful, enthusiastic monsters, it's time to scramble back to safety and attempt to reattach those limbs. Rolling around the area while legless and firing off rounds is a deranged and often unsettling activity that's unlike anything you've played before



Metal Gear Solid 3D: Snake Eater

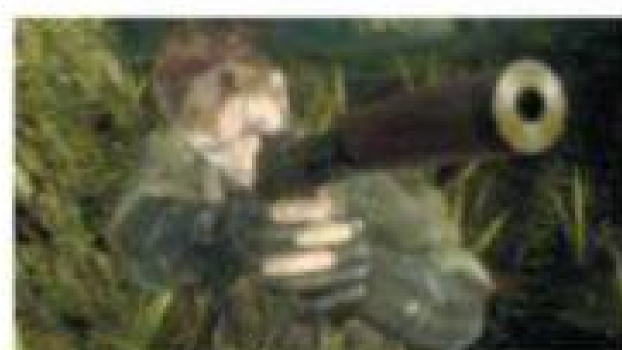
The conventional wisdom is that only games designed from the ground up for new hardware make the best use of it. But Kojima Productions' handheld record is not conventional, and *Metal Gear Solid 3D: Snake Eater* is a surprise: apart from Nintendo's own *Super Mario 3D Land*, no other game does as much with the console's headline feature.

Among the *Metal Gear* series, *Snake Eater* was the perfect choice: the environments could have been built for stereoscopic visuals. Its jungle is composed of large blades of grass, and dotted with trees, rocks and hills. Interiors are either claustrophobia-inducing corridors or cavernous hangars zigzagged with walkways, and are always filled with crates, furniture and guards, which serve to break up the game's even surfaces.

You'll spend a lot of time in the grass in *MGS3D*, peering out at patrolling guards and inching Snake forward on his belly. There will always be multiple blades in your field of vision, and the depth of each small grouping is distinct, creating a convincing effect with real texture to it. Many 3DS games have visuals that feel gimmicky and pop out, but here they reinvigorate a familiar world. Playing in 2D, even to give your eyes a quick rest, feels like a waste.

The absolute pinnacle of *MGS3D*'s use of 3D comes when aiming a gun in firstperson view while lying in the grass. The illusion of depth here is so layered that it beats almost everything else on 3DS to date

Publisher Konami
Developer Kojima Productions
Format 3DS
Release February 21 (US), March 8 (JP, UK)



HUNGRY FOR MORE?

It's a pity *MGS3D* doesn't offer more 3DS-specific features. The gyroscopic controls are used for balancing, while there's also the neat option to customise Snake's camouflage via the console's cameras. Most disappointing is the omission of PS2's multiplayer mode, which would surely have given it some online legs. In terms of content, *MGS3D* isn't the definitive version of a classic – that's *Subsistence* – but no other version looks like this.

The list goes on – judging enemy distance, or the terrific effects during a late chase sequence – but suffice it to say *MGS3D* is a must-have if you want to show off the 3DS hardware. The game itself is no slouch either, although after *Subsistence*, a director's cut released on PS2 with bags of extras, this feels a little light when viewed as a package (see 'Hungry for more?').

MGS3 is Kojima's finest hour. It's a focused but constantly inventive adventure, and the boss battles in particular showcase an imagination you just don't get in other games. Not one plays out like any of the others, and they're all magnificent here – barring perhaps The Fury, which retains its drop in framerate.

The game also offers a brilliant change in stealth. The natural camouflage of the jungle is a big departure from earlier games' boxier labs, enabling Snake to hide within touching distance of foes before striking. It's kept fresh with layouts that never repeat, always asking something new from sneaky minded players. Plus, it gives raging bulls the Close Quarters Combat system, and everything from AK47s to silenced sniper rifles.

Packed with detail, both in terms of its environments and mechanics, this is a game that pays back investment in spades. *MGS3* is a modern classic – the tightest, smartest and most emotional journey in the series – and even its HD update doesn't look as good as this portable treatment.

8



Haunt

About year into Kinect's life, there seem to be two main ways for development teams to approach things. The first is to take Microsoft at its word about the peripheral, delivering complex games that hinge on one-to-one motion-tracking, while quietly hoping the technology can keep up. The second – and much cannier – tactic is to pay attention to the unspoken rules: to appreciate that Kinect still struggles to work quickly and accurately, and to then carefully ensure that it never really has to.

This is the path *Haunt* follows, taming its design, reining in any obvious ambitions and offering a gentle family-friendly ghost tour powered by basic gesture controls. Take out the ducking and lunging, and it's a bare-bones adventure game: the narrative threads its way past locked doors and broken machinery, while the spooky mansion you're exploring is essentially a lavish 3D hypertext document. You may jog on the spot to inch through its rattling hallways, but *Haunt* is at its best when you're using your flashlight as a mouse pointer and clicking between objects, each one requiring gentle interaction before it gives up its secrets.

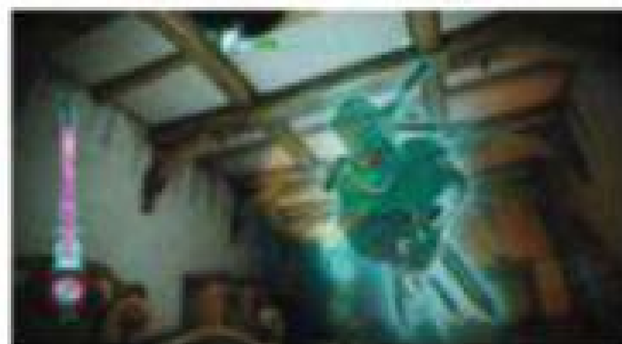
It's a design that prioritises basic reliability. Gesture recognition is loose and forgiving, and it makes no attempt to suggest Kinect's genuinely interpreting every movement. Instead, each manoeuvre feels like the empty-handed equivalent of pushing a button – albeit a button that tends to idle a little before it triggers anything. When it comes to puzzles, this works quite well, with animations and aural cues making it fairly clear whether or not your 360 understands what you're trying to do. In combat situations, though, the lag removes almost all of the drama, turning each ghost encounter into a graceless stumble from one input to the next. While *Haunt* is rarely frustrating, it's been robbed of any kind of internal rhythm.

Luckily, NanaOn-Sha's latest also comes with a smart script and a mischievous central performance from adventure gaming's fairy godfather, Tim Schafer. Cast as *Haunt*'s spectre-in-chief, he's a charmingly untrustworthy companion, and his steady chatter of encouragement does much to prod you through the game when the interactions have become a slog, and the miles of identical corridor start to blur together.

Schafer brings a touch of warmth to a game that's otherwise defined by cold pragmatism – an adventure too rigorously shaped by the limitations of the device it's built for. *Haunt*'s failings aren't hard to understand, but that doesn't make them any easier to ignore. In order to ensure Kinect's good behaviour, it must forever keep you at arm's length.

5

Publisher Microsoft
Developer NanaOn-Sha, Zoë Mode
Format 360
Release Out now



FIGHTING SPIRIT

During fights, *Haunt* always does its best to keep things moving along, throwing in punches, dropkicks and projectile tennis alongside phantoms that require you to either cover your eyes or your ears, or to fire off coils of magical paint. The design team has even clogged the mansion's halls with clouds of gas, flocks of bats and the odd skull-mounted laser to dive past. It's never entirely convincing, however, and the game can often feel busy and muddled rather than genuinely intricate.



Some of the ghosts you'll face in *Haunt*'s rickety corridors require a well-timed scream in order to deal them any damage. Most, however, will succumb to the odd jab and a couple of blasts from your flashlight

Little Deviants

Publisher SCE
Developer Bigbig
Format Vita
Release Out now (Japan), February 22 (EU, US)

Pity the little deviants, because they appear to have been focus-grouped into oblivion, all traces of character and charm smoothed off until what's left is a maniacally grinning blob that looks eerily like the decapitated head of one of Rayman's raving rabbids. Still, at least Bigbig's creations make appropriate mascots for their parent collection of minigames, which lacks legs.

Every one of Vita's litany of control inputs gets a game of its own, but it's the gyroscope that comes off best overall, allowing for responsive, precise handling in minigames that involve steering your deviants as they hurtle towards targets and around obstacles. And while the rear touchpad is equally reliable, the games showcasing it are not. One requires you to deform the landscape by pressing it from behind, but an isometric camera angle makes precise control difficult. Another asks you to pinch, pull and fling deviants around a wrestling arena – a request that occasionally showcases the difficulty of trying to approach the rear touchpad from the sides of the unit.

There isn't an awful game on show, but most are throwaway, and having to unlock each new example by getting a bronze rating in the previous challenge feels like unnecessary work. But *Little Deviants'* real problem is simple: it's not moreish, and its challenges fail to reveal the kinds of nuance on the second and third tries that will have you refining strategies and aiming to better scores. Without that incentive to return, you're unlikely to.

5



Everybody's Golf

Publisher SCE
Developer Clap Hanz
Format Vita
Release Out now (Japan), February 22 (EU, US)

Those expecting a convincing display of Vita's unique features from *Everybody's Golf* will be disappointed. The rear touchpad can be used to pinpoint the distance of objects on the map, swipes on the screen rustle like wind through the trees, and you can take a firstperson wander around the course, panning the camera as you go. That's your lot, and all are as pointless as they sound. Happily, the core mechanics are as digital as ever, the three-press control system being both precise and rewarding.

Offline, the principal time sink is Challenge Mode, a series of nine- and 18-hole games with point rewards for beating unseen CPU opponents. Points can be spent on costumes, new ball and club types, concept art, music and unlockable characters. There's little incentive to play as the latter, though, since completing challenges levels up Loyalty, adding to your stock of power shots, which give you an extra ten yards on the stroke of your choice. As such, you'll question the value in picking a new character who can drive a farther 15 yards off the tee, because it feels like a retrograde step from the one you've been using since you first loaded up the game.

Unadventurous *Everybody's Golf* may be, but it's wonderfully executed, and its presence at Vita's launch is welcome. With their endlessly smiling characters, cheery J-tunes and bright skies, *Everybody's Golf* titles are the best Nintendo-esque games a Sony console has ever seen, and this latest iteration is no exception.

7



Reality Fighters

Publisher SCE
Developer Novarama
Format Vita
Release February 22 (EU), February 23 (Japan), March 13 (US)

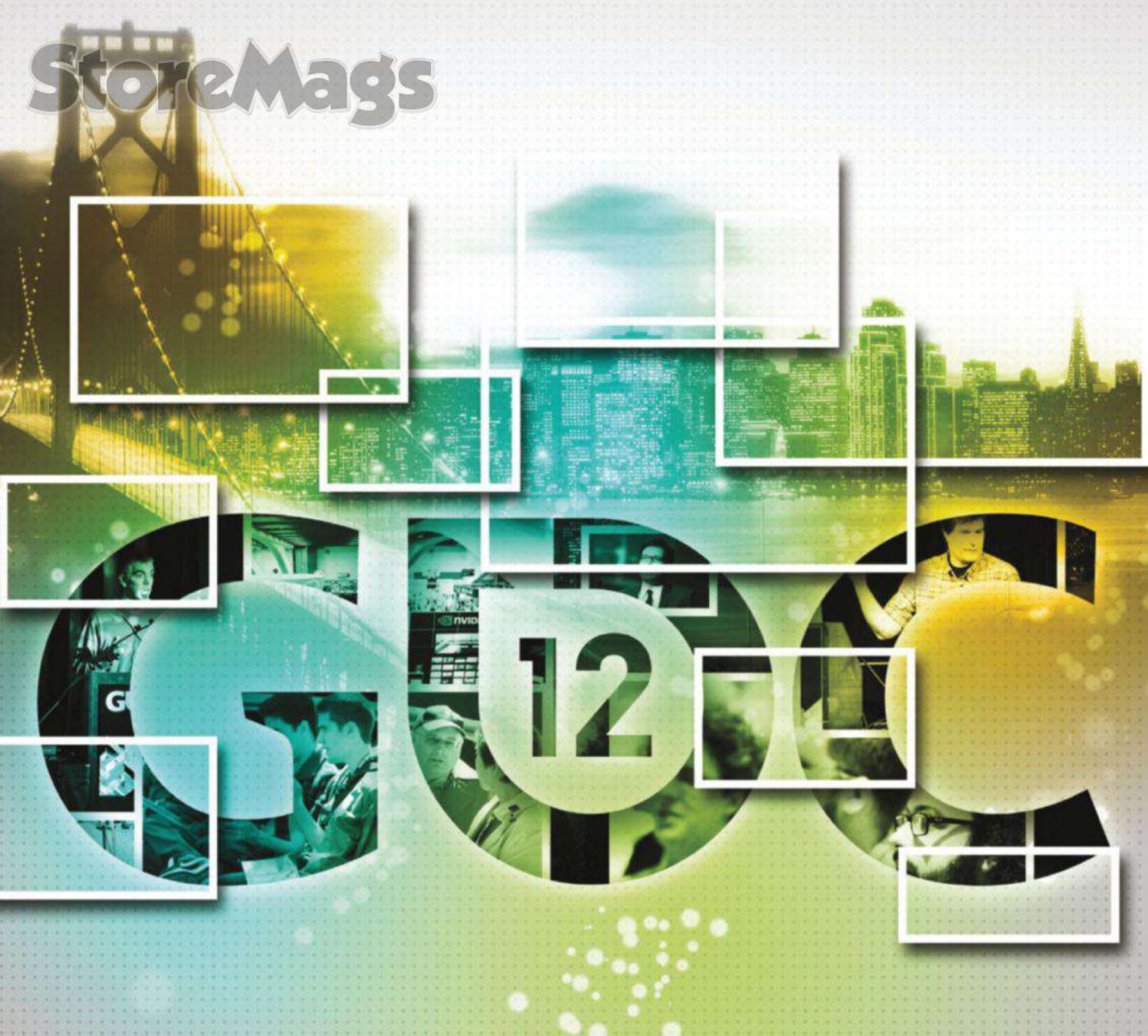
Novarama, maker of *Invizimals*, continues to spearhead SCE's augmented-reality charge, and to deliver games with stale personalities. It's fortunate, then, that *Reality Fighters* encourages you to add your own flavour to this 2D fighter with 3D character models. Mapping your face and adding your voice to a model may be a simple gimmick, but doling out punishment to a recognisable friend has a quirky charm.

As with *Invizimals*, an AR detection card can help set up fights wherever you are, but there's also the added bonus of being able to simply point the camera and watch as fighters are laid down automatically. It can be inconsistent, with combatants appearing in unlikely places, but it's mostly functional and an encouraging demonstration of the technology, with fights licking along smoothly. The irony is that Novarama's AR innovation is also the game's biggest flaw: as the camera jiggles around, it can seriously interfere with the solid (if derivative) combat. The developer has borrowed its core fighting from the best, namely Capcom's 2D beat 'em ups, but it lacks the aesthetic appeal to elevate it from robustly enjoyable to dazzling.

As a proof of concept, *Reality Fighters* is convincing, but it's sub-par as a high-priced fighting game, trailing the competition and offering novelty in place of substance. Augmented reality on Vita has been proven as a viable tool, so now it just needs to be applied to a more suitable genre than the 2D fighter to truly exploit its potential.

6




StoreMags
12

create

Lifting the lid on the art, science, and business of making games

This issue's People, Places, Things gets straight to the point (and click) on p128, with *Broken Sword* legend Charles Cecil talking about the soldier who almost curtailed his ambitions, and the adventures that followed, including those he's in the process of making. While brooding over his tale, we stumble upon the Gothic labyrinth that is Dracula's Castle on p130, and chart the evolution of this ever-changing abomination unto man. Another aspect of gaming that's seen multiple manifestations is the save point, a short history of which you'll find recorded on p132. Then for our Studio Profile on p134, we talk to Arkedo about pulling things back from the brink of oblivion at the last moment. On the topic of commercial concerns, we join Ninja Theory in The Making Of... on p138 for a retrospective retread of the paths it forged when crafting the well-reviewed *Enslaved: Odyssey To The West*, and discuss how it fell off the map when it came to sales. Concluding this issue's Create are our regular columnists, with designer Tadhg Kelly (p142) proposing that games aren't all-conquering, but a valuable part of the transmedia future, and LucasArts' Clint Hocking (p144) opening the door to a discussion about gaming's portals. Then Tiger Style's Randy Smith (p147) considers what it takes to satisfy a more mature breed of gamer, while writer James Leach (p148) opens up his heart and shares on the subject of caring, and what kind of touches can make gamers invest emotionally.



www.bit.ly/jT6wkn
The business section of **Edge**'s Web site



Crafting believable characters is one thing to strive for, but how vital is it? On p138 we talk to Ninja Theory about why a movie-like level of investment in story didn't equal blockbuster sales for *Enslaved*

People

CHARLES CECIL

Adventure game genius, national treasure, international man of mystery



"The story, the location and the puzzles need to be interwoven at every stage," says Cecil. "Come up with the story first – then work out how the narrative can be moulded to work as a game"

CV

URL www.revolution.co.uk
Selected softography *Inca Curse, Ship Of Doom, Espionage Island, Lure Of The Temptress, Beneath A Steel Sky, Broken Sword, Broken Sword II: The Smoking Mirror, In Cold Blood, Gold and Glory: The Road To El Dorado, Broken Sword: The Sleeping Dragon, Broken Sword: The Angel Of Death*
Current project TBC



When Charles Cecil was 18 months old, a Congolese soldier pointed a gun at his head and, for a few terrible seconds, looked certain to pull the trigger. A year before, his father had taken a job in the newly independent Republic of Congo overseeing the local office of a multinational company. Back then, it looked like the beginning of an exciting new life, but revolution was brewing and white expatriates were beginning to bear the brunt of anti-European fervour. Cecil, throwing stones from his backyard one morning, had caught the soldier on the leg as he passed. If it hadn't been for the frantic remonstrations of the family's gardener, he may have paid with his life.

Cecil's heavily pregnant mother fled the country with her son – a gruelling journey involving river boats and tiny mail planes, which last year was recounted in her fascinating memoir, Drums On The Night Air. After recuperating in Britain, the family moved to Nigeria for a while, before settling back in the UK. All this before Cecil was ten.

It's unsurprising then, that, on becoming a game designer, he would choose to create adventures. In the famed *Broken Sword* series, hero George Stobbart travels the world getting into desperate scrapes with exotic enemies and enigmatic secret societies. Surely this must have come from Cecil's formative experiences in Africa? He laughs when we put forward the theory. "It would be lovely to think that wouldn't it?" he says. "But yes, I'm sure some of that time affected me, and may well have given me that love of telling adventure stories.

"One of the most vivid memories I have is of going to Paris in the late '60s, when I was seven or eight," he recalls. "We stayed with my uncle, a Portuguese communist who'd fought against Franco in the Spanish Civil War and was such a romantic hero. And what was lovely were the smells of Paris, the Gitanes [cigarettes] and the way people walked differently. One of the important things about writing engaging games is to avoid cliché – draw on the poignancy of real experiences. The reason Paris figures so heavily in the *Broken Sword* games is because of those days, staying with my uncle and listening to his astonishing stories."

It was in the early '80s that Cecil first discovered technology. While attending Bedales School in Hampshire, he took an interest in mechanical engineering and later spent a year working for Ford on an industrial sponsorship. There he met Richard Turner, a fellow geek who had just disassembled the ROM of the ZX81 and written a book about it. Turner also owned a TRS-80 and, having played all of Scott Adams' text-based adventure games on it, set up his own software label, Artic Computing, to begin coding similar titles for Sinclair's range of computers. Cecil agreed to help, writing text-only titles like *Inca Curse, Ship Of Doom* and *Espionage Island.*

After Artic, Cecil spent two years as a development manager at US Gold and then at Activision, before getting into creating adventure games again. This time, he set up Revolution Software with three partners, Tony Warriner, Dave Sykes and Noirin Carmody. The first game was the ingenious *Lure Of The Temptress*, an Arthurian adventure, following a peasant boy named Diermot as he sets out to rid his kingdom of an evil sorceress. The game used a mechanic that Cecil referred to as 'virtual theatre', in which NPCs were able to freely wander the whole world, communicating with each other and interacting with objects, rather than taking up the usual static positions. It had something else central to the success of Revolution's titles: wit.

> "An important thing about writing engaging games is to avoid cliché – draw on real experiences"

The company's next title, *Beneath A Steel Sky*, took a new direction. While working at Activision, Cecil had contacted comic-book artist Dave Gibbons about licensing Watchmen as a video game. The two stayed in touch and when Revolution was set up, Gibbons and Cecil started discussing game concepts. "He got involved very early and brought his own ideas," says Cecil. "He hand-drew the backgrounds, then they were painted and scanned in. He was hugely influential." The result was a darker, cyberpunk-theme romp with Kafka-esque undertones, but again, an everyman hero and a clever sense of humour kept the tone light.

From then, it's really all been about *Broken Sword*, the adventure series that explored ideas of Templar conspiracies years before the Dan Brown novels (it was inspired by the Umberto Eco novel Foucault's Pendulum). There have been four instalments, as well as director's cut editions for Wii, DS and smartphones, and the popularity is still there – the iPhone editions of *Broken Sword I* and *II* have seen over five million downloads. Cecil puts the success down to a set of simple structural archetypes he's always followed.

"The story, the location and the puzzles need to be interwoven together at every stage," he says. "You come up with the story first, of course – the locations, the characters – but then you work out how the narrative can be moulded at the very highest level to work in terms of a game."

It looks as though this will be a busy year for Revolution, which remains a four-person company, with a network of freelancers – a very modern set-up. Although Cecil won't confirm it, the company is believed to be working on a new *Broken Sword* for iOS and maybe PSN and XBLA. "We're totally embracing HD technology," he says. "In terms of gameplay it's innovation rather than revolution. A lot of gamers felt the original bits in *Broken Sword: Director's Cut* were quite old-fashioned and preferred the new sections, but we don't want to alienate our original fans. We want the games to feel contemporary, lively, but they will be unabashedly 2D. And our new game is looking absolutely fantastic."

And it's not the only project he has in mind. "Dave Gibbons and I keep talking about writing another adventure together and we have a design that's quite well advanced," he reveals. "It's a science-fiction adventure, but very much drawing on the idea of interactive comic books and how gameplay can be moulded towards a more dynamic visual style. We keep starting it and then something else overtakes us. We'll do it… one day… soon…"

Awarded an OBE last year, and having spent time helping to craft the BBC's Dr Who Adventure titles, Cecil has also become more than another veteran British game designer – something akin to a national treasure. Gaming owes a lot to a gardener in Leopoldville, Congo, who in the early '60s confronted a soldier to protect a little boy and the vast adventure that lay ahead of him. ■

Places

DRACULA'S CASTLE

Konami's evolving quest to create the ultimate Gothic fortress



Castlevania is associated with 12th-century Gothic architecture, but the *LOS* team was equally inspired by earlier European work, especially from France and Spain in the 11th century

From *Castlevania* series
Developer Konami
Origin Japan
Debut 1986

There's a classic moment in Bram Stoker's Dracula where a solicitor named Jonathan Harker climbs down from a carriage in the Carpathian Mountains and beholds "a vast ruined castle, from whose tall black windows came no ray of light, and whose broken battlements showed a jagged line against the sky". This portentous arrival should give a familiar chill to fans of Konami's *Castlevania* games, since they often deposit the player before a daunting gate, beyond which sinister spires rise up against the moon. The franchise permits itself generous liberties with its source material, filling it with perky young anime characters and Universal Horror monsters, but the castle's foreboding sentience is a constant, even as protagonists, terrains and gameplay mechanics vary around it.

While the heroic Belmont clan and its proxies have traversed a variety of fortresses during their quarter-century of adventuring, these structures have all been unified in their expression of a castle's qualities. The game's fiction even suggests such permutations of Dracula's Castle are driven by its supernatural aura, and so they are all in fact the same spookily morphing fortress.

At first, the concept was mostly a cosmetic one. A *Castlevania* castle contained heart-holding candelabras and breakable walls, blood-red curtains and elegant chandeliers, libraries and clock towers – all manner of Gothic window dressing for crisscrossing webs of corridors, stairs, and platforms. But as the series evolved into the more open action/RPG template, this visual theme took on a metaphysical dimension.

Beginning with *Symphony* *Of The Night*, a castle was much more than just candles and stones. It was a vast maze that embodied an esoteric view of the individual's journey through consciousness. While many would tread the main paths, only a few adepts would ascend to the highest tiers of completion percentage. And, as in the novel House Of Leaves, a castle was somehow bigger on the inside than the outside. Intestinally wending passageways rendered small rooms immense, and hidden realms lurked beyond the visible edges of the map, tugging the remote limits towards infinity. A castle was a microcosm – the world in a box. By *Portrait Of Ruin*, this abstraction was entrenched enough that players could visit deserts and towns without feeling as though they had escaped the castle's walls.

The concept, however, developed on a flat plane, and this has thwarted most attempts to modernise *Castlevania* with 3D gameplay; the



One *Castlevania* hallmark is inch-by-inch map revelation, which XBLA's *Harmony Of Dissonance* did away with by letting the player pull back the camera and see the whole map. Dracula's Castle seems less mysterious when it looks like *Elevator Action*

introduction of the Z axis usually upsets the delicate systems balanced along the X and Y. But with 2010's *Lords Of Shadow*, MercurySteam figured out how to make a modern *God Of War*-style action game really feel like *Castlevania*. The company did it by learning from both positive and negative examples of the franchise's history, with a keen eye for the most essential icons and mechanics from the 2D classics.

"The knowledge that the past 3D *Castlevania* titles hadn't worked was always present," says Konami's **Dave Cox**, the producer of *Lords Of Shadow*. "One reason we were selected to produce the game was that we had recognisably '*Castlevania*' elements working in our 3D engine, and we were able to demonstrate an aesthetic design that captured the atmosphere the series was famous for. What is interesting is that we were able to look at specific levels, like the gardens from the N64 title, and create a stage that mimicked them, but took it to a whole new level by using the technology we had to play with. It did, however, make us very conscious that every camera, every stage, had to be absolutely perfect in order to avoid unfavourable comparisons."

There are many secrets to exhume and multiple paths in each level. All inexorably lead to the ultimate castle

Lords Of Shadow blends Gothic and 11th century European architecture into a fantasy world evocative of the films of Guillermo Del Toro. The rugged vistas, snowy wastes and lush swamps that you battle, leap and climb through on the way to the ultimate castle were inspired by landscape images from Spain and France. "In studying the classics," says Cox, "we quickly realised we could create a world rather than just a castle, because even in the 8bit landscapes there were mountains, forests, and lakes. But there are a lot of nods to the series in terms of level design – the clock tower, for instance – and we would have been mad to ignore them."

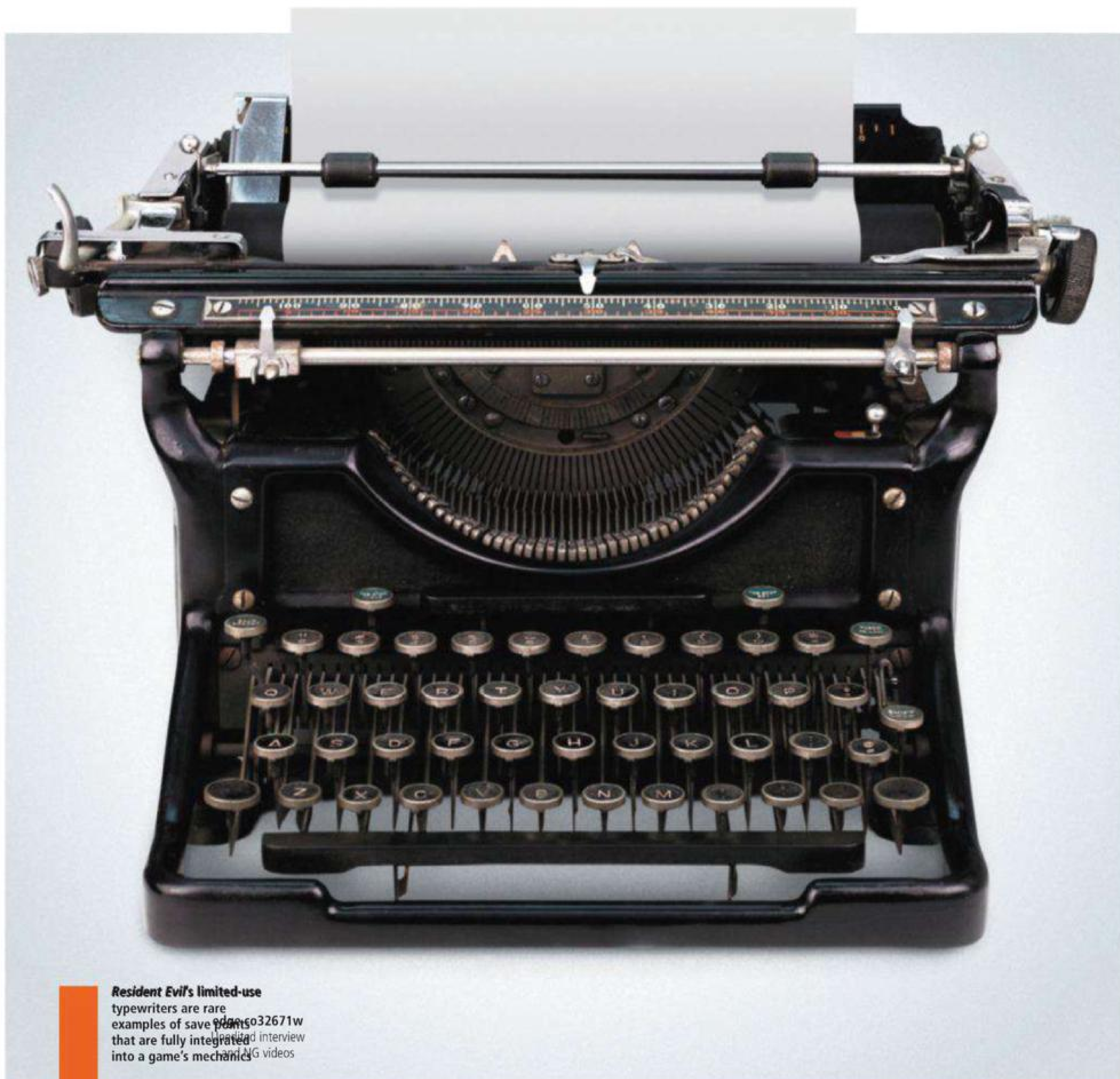
At the same time, the team jettisoned more cartoonish aspects that wouldn't have translated well into a more realistic setting. "The hearts had to go," says Cox, "but the general layout and candlelit element reinforced *Lords Of Shadow*'s link to the past and added to its overall Gothic look."

More importantly, Cox's team found ways to integrate the backtracking that defines the series. The game is split into levels via a map screen, which seems blasphemous at first. But the necessity of revisiting prior levels with new abilities remains, so that the player's progress is not linear but circular – a widening gyre. There are many secrets to exhume from nooks and crannies, and multiple paths in each level. All inexorably lead to the ultimate castle, which has much more gravity than the game's bête noire, Dracula. "The castle was viewed as a specific character in many respects," says Cox. "That was one of the reasons we wanted the player to take some time to get there, so it felt like meeting an important person within the story." ■

Things

SAVE POINTS

Why an immersion-breaking necessity can also be a crucial piece of design



***Resident Evil*'s limited-use typewriters are rare examples of save points that are fully integrated into a game's mechanics**

Save points are easy to resent. They are, after all, harbingers of in-game admin. Whereas books can be picked up where you left off with minimal fuss, and films and TV shows can be consumed in a sitting, save points demand that the working-day language of data storage intrudes upon your relaxation time. You don't 'play' a save point: it's a practicality, a momentary disruption of a game's flow to ensure that time isn't wasted and progress is retained.

At least that's true for many save points, but some are harder to separate from the fabric of their host games. Save point frequency can make the difference between a hard game and an easy one, and it can be responsible for momentary difficulty spikes in otherwise straightforward games, too. Push deep into uncharted parts of *Metroid Prime* with Samus's missile supply near-empty and her health running low, and the euphoric relief of stumbling into an energy- and ammo-restoring save station can be overwhelming.



***Dead Rising*'s toilet-based saves are spaced generously around its Willamette mall setting. Getting to them is the tricky part**

Of course, Samus isn't saving, but performing an act of data backup, or some other in-universe excuse for her actions. Nothing can puncture carefully honed fiction and remind you that you're playing a game like a save point, so they rarely appear without the fig leaf of a contextual explanation to hide their true role.

And fittingly, considering they're gaming's bookmarks, that explanation will often involve writing. A day in *Harvest Moon* isn't complete – or, for that matter, permanent – until recorded in your character's diary; save in *Final Fantasy IX*, and the moogle that you're talking to will whip out a giant, leather-bound tome and quill pen. It may not be a direct analogue for the action you're really performing, but the motif works. Ink drying on paper communicates a shift from the ephemeral to the enduring.

Nothing can puncture crafted fiction and remind you that you're playing a game like a save point

It was also the metaphor behind *Resident Evil*'s typewriters. These clacking antiques – themselves a neat capturing of the Spencer Mansion's eerie out-of-time quality – are a set of save points audaciously integrated into the game's survival themes. Early *Resident Evil* was about hoarding supplies – herbs, ammo and weapons – but, most daring of all, it also required players to hoard saves in the form of ink ribbons, one of which was used up every time they saved their game.

Ribbons weren't especially rare, but they didn't have to be. Their very presence undercut players' confidence in the wisdom of saving, while letting them do so almost whenever they wished. It was a perfect solution to the problem of players recording every minor piece of progress and reloading their game when a panicky trigger finger saw them fire their last shotgun rounds into a wall. In any other context, the system would be unfair. But this was survival horror, and Capcom understood that while it couldn't directly threaten players' lives, it could torment them with the possibility of wasting time.

As the series has become more action-focused, the need for such a system has lessened. *Resident Evil 4* offered typewriters with infinite ink, whereas *5* didn't feature them at all. But *Resident Evil* wasn't the last time zombies would inspire an inventive save system in a Capcom game. *Dead Rising* might have been a more relaxed brand of survival horror, but it was still its save points that provided a faint background hint of constant threat. What better representation of saving's role as an inconvenient necessity could there be than Frank West needing to visit the bathroom to record his progress? It might lack the symbolism of paper and ink, but it certainly makes more sense as an urgent detour than Chris Redfield's repeated desire to jot things down. *No More Heroes* would take the joke further by letting you watch Travis Touchdown drop his trousers while you saved the game, but it was the mechanics behind *Dead Rising*'s save system that made it stand out. With only one save slot, and a story system that saw critical mission windows open and close regardless of whether you were in position to activate them, *Dead Rising* managed to be less stringent than *Resident Evil*'s rationed ribbons while retaining the potential for players to scupper their progress. Only this time it wasn't game time they were in danger of losing, but the ability to advance their game.

Save points are archaic. The generation that grew up with them can no longer afford to have software dictate the form of its free time. What quicksaves started, autosaves and checkpoints finished. Games that can't be picked up from where you left off are the exception now, not the rule. But the spectre of the save point still haunts even those games that have managed to turn autosaving into a rod with which to beat players' backs. Barely an action goes by in *Dark Souls* without an autosave committing it to memory; yet far from lessening the tension, the seriousness of permanence underscores every mistake in-game.

But, as *Dark Souls* players will attest, there's nothing quite as special as stumbling across a campfire for the first time. These glowing beacons aren't save points in the traditional sense, but they are their descendants, functioning as health restorers, restart points, and level-up stations. *Dark Souls*' save system ensures you can't forget your failures, but stumbling across one of these lodestars in the dark enables you to cement your victories. In an era when the save point feels increasingly old-fashioned, it's a powerful reminder of the sense of shelter, progress and achievement that these practical necessities used to offer. ■

STUDIO PROFILE

Arkedo Studio

Six years ago, a French studio set out to make 'bright yellow games'. Here's how it's done so far



1 Pixel the cat is the eponymous star of Arkedo's third Xbox Live Indie Game, *Pixel!*, a scrolling platformer with a luminous art style.
2 *Jump!* invokes Indiana Jones with a devious time-attack platformer filled with bombs and deadly crabs.
3 Arkedo's art, such as that in *Big Bang Mini*, channels a mixture of cute fantasy and retro detailing – the same kind of blend you often see in the vinyl toy market.
4 *Nervous Brickdown* is a *Breakout* refresh with character.
5 *Swap!* does the impossible, providing block games with a sense of character without sacrificing readability.
6 Art from Arkedo's current title, Project Hell Yeah!, isn't afraid to riff on contemporary games – such as *DeathSpank*

Listen to **Camille Guermonprez** for long enough and you may end up deciding that a good indie developer needs the pluck, resilience and impractically optimistic outlook of a Warner Bros cartoon character.

Guermonprez is the co-founder of Paris-based Arkedo Studio and, as he tells it, his company's history is one of ingenuity and disaster: a cycle composed of astonishing successes and terrible, impossible failures. People have flung bags of money at Arkedo, but they've also flung frying pans. Back in late 2010, for example, the situation was so bad that, even as Guermonprez packed up a demo of his team's latest work and took it to Game Connection Lyon in order to pitch it to publishers, he was ready to declare his company dead. "It was the last fireworks for us," he laughs. "Our last fireworks while the boat was sinking: put on bright clothes, a smile and clean teeth. We're a bit of a romantic firm here. If you're going to die, let's do it in style. I was prepared for that."



Arkedo's *Big Bang Mini* followed debut game *Nervous Brickdown*, helping to establish the studio's vivid identity

Guermonprez co-founded the studio along with artist and designer Aurélien Regard in 2006, after he had been forced out of his last company, a developer of mobile games. "That team grew to be about 60 or 70 people throughout the course of its life," Guermonprez remembers. "I stupidly raised some VC money around year three or four, and when I managed to do that, the guy who put the money in took extra care to fire me within a few months. Then they fired the guy who fired me, and then they couldn't find a third guy to fire."

Arkedo Studios has two sacred principles: stay small and retain IP – simple but enormously tricky

Guermonprez had shares in the developer, and cashed out with around £300,000. It would have been enough to cover his old company's payroll for just 17 days; he founded Arkedo determined that it would fund a new team of three for over a year. "We wanted to make real games by ourselves, games that came in a box, and we wanted to spend at least 16 months doing it," he says. "That was a very strong drive. I think you need some kind of failure in order to put yourself forward."

At the heart of Arkedo Studios were two sacred principles: stay small and retain IP, both simple concepts that can be enormously tricky to pull off. "Staying small was easy because of what I did before," laughs Guermonprez. "I had started small and then followed the classic, accepted course of companies: if you're successful, you should be bigger. We hired a lot and raised money; I lived through moderate success and hated it.

"That said, Arkedo's small size would not be possible without Aurélien. He's really playing many parts in the band. He's my partner, he's a graphic designer, he was a producer until a few months ago, he's the game designer and level designer, and he keeps everyone happy and smiling. If you have someone like that by your side, it's your responsibility to provide the means for him. I'm funding the thing that he can do, that's how I see that."

And as for retaining IP?

"I made sure that it was not a question that would be allowed to be asked," Guermonprez explains. "With our first two games, I took care to only see publishers once the game was done. I was a CEO for six years, even if I was a bad one, so I can talk business a little. I wanted to meet the higher-level people and say: 'This is a distribution deal. There's no risk – what you see is what you get.' It's good to say, especially when us French guys are very famous for over-promising and under-delivering and having very big mouths. This was my way of saying, 'I'm French, but listen anyway. The game is done!'"

For Guermonprez, holding on to IP is about more than just money. "It comes down to this: if our games are bad, we want it to be our fault, and not because someone asked to add a zombie survival element or whatever," he argues. "What we're selling is being different. With Arkedo, I say we're small and we have our own colour – let's say bright yellow. You can be big and me-too, but you can't be small and me-too. When you're talking with publishers, there are so many opinions flying around, it's like everyone comes in with their own colour. When you have too many colours together, you get brown. Brown and small is not possible. Ninety-nine per cent of people hate bright yellow, but we're going to make bright yellow games for the bright yellow crowd. Small games break even quickly. It works, and it doesn't work if everyone else adds a bit of their opinion."



Founded 2006
Employees 10
Key staff Camille Guermonprez (co-founder and head of studio), Aurélien Regard (art and design)
URL www.arkedo.com
Selected softography *Nervous Brickdown, Big Bang Mini, Arkedo Series*
Current project Project Hell Yeah!

Arkedo's micro-studio setup is fairly common in 2012, but back in 2006 it didn't seem entirely sane. Nobody else in France was following Guermonprez's model, and Arkedo even had to ask a publisher to lie to Nintendo on its behalf, so that it could receive a licence to make DS games, since only studios with deals in place were allowed access to devkits.

The studio was founded to make a single game: a fresh twist on *Breakout* called *Nervous Brickdown*. "But since that game did OK on DS, I managed to get my investment back and so we put it into a new game," says Guermonprez. *Big Bang Mini* was another DS title, a lavishly pretty and inventive arcade-style shooter that went on to make even more money than *Brickdown*. It helped define the team as a boutique outfit with a penchant for richly coloured artwork and a knack for taking very simple arcade mechanics and reworking them in interesting ways. Arkedo reinvested all its money once again. But its next





Arkedo's work on the Xbox Live Indie Games service for its Arkedo Series set an early standard for the platform that most other games have since failed to match. The studio even received a contract to make a Windows Phone 7 title off the back of games such as *Pixel!*

project ran aground when the publisher attached mysteriously stopped paying the studio.

In debt and with the DS market ravaged by piracy, Arkedo turned to Xbox Live Indie Games hoping to secure a new contract while also learning how to work on bigger screens. The Arkedo Series brought the studio's design, wit and sophisticated use of colour to Microsoft's platform, and the team ended up making a launch game for Windows Phone 7 off the back of their success. Another unannounced project ran aground because of yet more troubles with publishers, however, and, by the middle of 2010, the studio was on the brink of closure.

"I was prepared psychologically to repay pretty large debts: about two-thirds of my salary for the next 20 years," says Guermonprez. "It was done, we were dead, it was all over. That was it – we played and we lost.

"We tried a little last thing, though: let's give ourselves four months, and we'll get the whole team and make our dream game and see what happens. If nobody's interested, then we can say, 'OK, we're not relevant.' It's OK to die in that situation."

Arkedo's 'final' project also turned out to be its most ambitious. Currently codenamed Project Hell Yeah!, it's a dizzying blend of playstyles wrapped up with an art style that Guermonprez describes as "gore-cute". It features the same boudoir mix of deep reds and pinks and purples seen in the likes of *Big Bang Mini*, but they're sprayed over a cast of drooling, many-uddered freaks, ready to haemorrhage blood and gristle.

Guermonprez: "It's interesting in terms of creativity. Sometimes frustration can be pretty cool. We put in that game all our frustrations, all the things we'd been through over the last two years. It was so much that it was funny. We've spent the last few months just creating assets. It's the biggest game we've ever done."

In November 2010, Arkedo took Project Hell Yeah! to Game Connection, expecting the worst. "Within two meetings I knew my life had changed again," laughs Guermonprez. "I knew I would not spend the next 20 years packaging yogurts to repay my debts. In a few meetings, we knew we had something potentially good."

Arkedo signed with Sega. "They were the publisher that reacted most positively to it, and they put a hefty premium on the price I asked for. All my debts were immediately covered. That was the best day. It looks like a story you'd tell indie guys before you put them to sleep, but it actually happened. They gave us enough money to make the game the best we can. We're keeping the IP, they send us arcade games, they cheer us up, and they let us make our game."

> "It's very romantic. Even when life hits you hard, you can still come back and make something of yourself"

Sega also suggested that the team develop Project Hell Yeah! for multiple platforms. Whether Guermonprez liked it or not, in other words, Arkedo would have to get bigger. It's been growing for the past year. "We were three for *Nervous Brickdown*, four for *Big Bang Mini*, and six by the start of Project Hell Yeah!" Guermonprez calculates. The studio's currently hovering around the ten-person mark as it works on two versions of its upcoming game, while Pasta Games – the 12-man outfit with which Arkedo shares an office – handles another.

Some things haven't changed, however: Arkedo's retained its signature graphical style, and its IP, too. It also still works out of an old printing house in Denfert-Rochereau. "Arkedo for me is part of the community of where I live," Guermonprez explains. "I've lived in the same place in Paris for 20 years now. I'm very into food and I know all the chefs. You get to know the whole neighbourhood. I had dreamt of working in this building, and one day the landlord said 'yes'. There was a sense of belonging to this place, making it right and being ambassadors for the way we want to be: nice people, polite."

Among the usual workstations and cables, Arkedo's studio also has a 45-year-old olive tree that was installed after Pasta Games' Fabien Delpiano admitted he had always wanted to work underneath one. (Guermonprez: "It was something that he never thought would happen, so I brought him this huge tree and there was much rejoicing.") The office also boasts a professional-grade kitchen tucked away in a corner, the heart of what Guermonprez calls his "secret restaurant". "When I set up Arkedo, I was wondering whether I wanted to open another studio, or a restaurant," he admits. "My wife told me: 'No way – you will be drunk at 2am every day'. That's true, actually – I would have a tendency to stay late and come back a little bit drunk. So I decided to go halfway and have a bit of a restaurant.

"We have people here from many different regions of France and they have become a little bit aware of the cool [food] they have in their hometown, and they bring it and we eat it. It's a weird combination of food and gaming and friends. It should not happen, but it does. We put in our boilerplate from the beginning that we want to conquer the world with kindness and good food, and amazingly this plan seems to work pretty well."

Yet times have finally caught up with the Arkedo vision: Paris, France and the rest of Europe are starting to fill up with micro-studios turning out smart little projects for iOS or other download platforms. With Project Hell Yeah!, Guermonprez admits: "We have run into our general level of incompetence. It won't show, but we have gone through major growing pains." Arkedo's next project will be smaller and he may split the studio into two teams to work on it. "We'll make competition between team blue and team yellow and make a ten- or 11-month project."

"In the end, it's been very romantic," he concludes. "Even when life gives you very hard hits, you have friends and you can still come back and make something of yourself. Yes, there are high risks and everything, but if it works out, this is the most rewarding life you can get." ■

Denis Bourdain

Q&A



Camille Guermonprez
Co-founder and head of studio, Arkedo Studios

Once Project Hell Yeah! is finished for Sega, Guermonprez hopes to capitalise on Arkedo's momentum in an unexpected way.

Have you given much though to what you're doing after Project Hell Yeah!?
Alongside Arkedo, I'm starting a publisher for indie guys. I want to make something really different. I want to make the publisher I've been looking for and haven't found. This publisher will do three things. The first thing is to finance prototypes, from one genius working alone to teams of five, six indie guys or even students. The idea will be to fund a prototype and to give the money absolutely when people need it, which is when you're doing the game and not: "OK, let's write a contract and, after the contract is cleared, let's pay you in 60 days." No. You have the money right away. Two: of course everybody keeps their IP. The third thing is I've just bought a huge house, 30 minutes from Paris. It's an artist's house. The idea for this place is to work with people who have not done games yet, but who would really like to do games. We'll get people who just have a really good concept and want to get it out of their head to work with developers. They'll be able to stay in the house for one or two months with us, have all the people to work with nearby, and get it done.

Are you talking about creating a framework for creativity?
Well, we can help with the code thing, for example. We have ten years of experience of working on our games: we have all the tools and level editors between us and Pasta Games, and we'll put all that stuff together in a big jar, and tell people they can have what they want and hopefully make something better. This is something that we have been wanting to do for years and years. It's a small thing, which I'd really like to do now: to help other little studios do their breakthrough thing.

Do you have a name for this publisher yet, or has it not progressed that far?
Yes. Just to give you a clue to the kind of thing we want to do, the name of the publisher is Nice Guys. It's going to be the same as Arkedo but for the people, and it's something I'm really looking forward to.

Do you think it will clash at all with your current working relationships?
Sega's aware of it, and they're quite interested, actually. It's a bit of a scout job. Sega knows now that publishers are good at finding the big studios, the studios that are more than 50 people. Those teams are on their radar. But now, you have an indie million-seller every month, and these publishers are just not equipped to see these guys, to know that they are good and to have them on their radar. I know that this is something we can do – to help get the prototype done and then maybe show it to big publishers or publish it on our own. We haven't decided yet. That would depend on the project.





Arkedo's probably the only game studio with its own olive tree. The printing house that the team calls home is shared with sister studio Pasta Games

THE MAKING OF...

Enslaved: Odyssey To The West

Brains and brawn, gaming and cinema, ambition and failure: we chart Ninja Theory's epic attempt to make us care about game characters



Alessandro Taini's concept art illustrates a verdant apocalypse, a welcome change from wastelands

Publisher Namco Bandai
Developer Ninja Theory
Format 360, PS3
Origin UK
Release 2010

Moral guardians often warn of the effects games can have on players, but what about the people who make them? If you're a programmer on *GTAV*, do you yearn to batter people with baseball bats? If you work at Infinity Ward, do you itch to bunny hop everywhere?

Well, if you'd visited Ninja Theory's offices in Cambridge during the making of *Enslaved* in 2009, you'd have seen buff blokes and barrels of whey protein stashed under desks. *Enslaved* – with its ripped hero, Monkey – was a game that encouraged people to become bodybuilders.

"Something definitely kicked off big time," remembers technical art director **Stuart Adcock**. "We had people strutting around the office, looking at [art] reference and then feeling a bit sheepish that they weren't quite big enough. The animators themselves were jumping around pretending to be Monkey, and when they saw videos of themselves they thought, 'Hang on, I look a bit weedy.'"

Yet the real story behind this game isn't brawn, but emotions. Games are good at making you care about unlikely things, such as collecting gold coins, but the Ninja Theory team wanted players to care about something more sophisticated than that: *Enslaved*'s characters. "I wanted to see if we could pull off more subtle character relationships," says **Tameem Antoniades**, Ninja Theory's creative director. "One of my favourite games of all time was *Another World* on my beloved Amiga. Another was *Ico*, which I later learnt was also inspired by *Another World*. I wanted to create something akin to that experience. An epic, melancholic adventure where you care about a companion that is not real. Everything else serves that purpose: the performance-capture technology, the story, the setting, and the faceless anonymity of the antagonists."

Set in a post-apocalyptic future where an abandoned New York has been reclaimed by nature, *Enslaved* was about more than just thirdperson combat and platforming – it was also a retelling of ancient Chinese epic Journey To The West as a sci-fi adventure that featured killer mechs and just three human characters. The first of the latter was Monkey, who underwent a long and in-depth evolution. Art director **Alessandro Taini** started off with a series of concept sketches based on Snowflake, a one-of-a-kind albino





Technical art director Stuart Adcock (left) worked on the facial solver that brought Monkey to life, while chief of technology Mike Ball took charge of the AI behind Trip

gorilla which was housed in Barcelona Zoo. "Monkey was originally more of a beast," he remembers, "but as the narrative developed we decided to make him more human."

Bringing humanity to its characters ended up being at the centre of *Enslaved*'s entire approach. Its story is like a three-way buddy movie: in the opening levels, Monkey and a woman called Trip escape from a crashing slave ship. Scared of facing the post-apocalyptic wilds of Manhattan solo, Trip traps Monkey by fitting him with a telepathic headband that will kill him if she dies. She needs his brawn if she's going to survive the army of mechs standing between her and her village. Of course, the ape man is unimpressed at finding himself enslaved again.

> "Alex brought precision. Each line is like a homing missile crafted to elicit specific feeling"

Trip and Monkey's surprisingly subtle love/hate tussle would be more than enough for most games, but *Enslaved* goes further by including Pigsy, a corpulent friend of Trip's father. Witnessing the three characters' relationship is a real treat, as summed up in an unforgettable scene where Pigsy quizzes Monkey about Trip and then confesses he has designs on her, without realising that she can hear every word they say. The story in this game is funny, tragic and, most of all, dramatic.

It should be no surprise, then, to learn that Ninja Theory hired a movie screenwriter to help it nail *Enslaved*'s emotional arc. **Alex Garland**, best known for The Beach, 28 Days Later and his work on this year's Judge Dredd reboot, spent time at Ninja Theory's offices as the game's co-writer and helped refine the cinematic approach.

"The ambition that exists in the game was stated the first time I met Tameem," Garland remembers. "He told me: 'I want to try something that's pushing forwards on narrative. That's why we've come to a film writer rather than a games writer.' He wanted someone not too versed in the industry, but he was surprised that the bloke he'd stumbled across was a fanatical gamer!"

Garland, who had already shopped the licence for a 28 Days Later game around various unenthusiastic developers and written the aborted Halo movie script, proved a brilliant collaborator for the project. "Alex brought precision," recalls Antoniades. "Each line he writes is like a homing missile crafted to elicit specific feeling and understanding in the audience. He worked with us for two years with a small, mixed-discipline group of design, art and audio directors to make sure the story was being told across all the senses in cutscenes and gameplay."

The writer's approach led to several inspired sequences, such as the one where Monkey must race Pigsy to the top of a junkyard Titan. The rivalry built between the characters gave both Monkey and the player the impetus to succeed – not for points, but to see Pigsy's reaction.

More central to the storytelling, however, was Monkey's interaction with Trip. Ninja Theory's technical team had shelved *Heavenly Sword*'s engine for the out-of-the-box multiplatform support offered by Unreal 3. Yet on top of the difficulties of working with a new engine, the company was also taking its first step towards a collaborative AI system. "Creating the AI for Trip was a big new challenge for us," says chief of technology **Mike Ball**. "It was important to create a character who felt like she was part of the action, with her own set of skills, rather than just being an escort character. There was a really nice system that allowed her to interact with items in the environment, so she'd happily go and wander off to sit on a wrecked car and admire the view. Unfortunately, it was a feature we had to turn off due to a bug in the final master candidate."

Even without the more sophisticated AI, *Enslaved*'s game design played up Trip's usefulness. She was the brains to Monkey's brawn: hacking terminals, upgrading Monkey's power staff and distracting enemy mechs. It gave the combat system an added edge. "*Enslaved* had a much slower and [more] deliberate pace of combat than *Heavenly Sword*," says Ball. "We termed it a 'strategic combat system', where the intention was for the player to analyse the scene ahead to determine how they might utilise the environment and hence plan a strategy before rushing in with their fists."

Together, Trip and Monkey proved more than the sum of their parts, with the gameplay

emphasising the emotional journey they were on as they learned to complement each other's skills.

The final pillar of the effort to bring *Enslaved*'s characters to life was in the cast of actors assembled to play them. Notably, of course, was Andy Serkis, who is not simply a great actor in a performance-capture suit, but also a huge advocate for the technology's potential. Having first teamed up with Ninja Theory on *Heavenly Sword*, Serkis signed on to play Monkey in *Enslaved* and act as dramatic co-director during the performance capture shoot at House Of Moves in LA. "The thing about Andy is he doesn't feel any stigma attached to games," says Garland. "For many actors, the only way you'd get them in a game is to throw money at them."

Joined by US TV actress Lindsey Shaw and Brit Richard Ridings, the cast worked with Antoniades to prepare for their roles. Actors in ping-pong-ball-studded suits are always an odd sight, but *Enslaved* was even stranger than usual, because Serkis was preparing to play Ian Dury in Sex & Drugs & Rock & Roll. "Because Ian Dury was badly crippled on one side, Andy was running every morning to lose as much weight as possible while exercising only one half of his body," Antoniades recalls. "He had Ian Dury's hairstyle, clothing and speech pattern. Basically, Andy was now Ian Dury playing Monkey."

Such oddities aside, the actors were more than just reference points for the animators: they were integral to raising the emotional stakes. "We wanted to keep dialogue to an absolute minimum and understand the characters' souls through their eyes, through their expressions, through their voice," says Antoniades. "It's one of those things gamers don't believe you need… until you actually see it; then all of a sudden you remember those characters, and the story, and the world. It transcends being a bit of pop entertainment."

Back in England, Ninja Theory's team worked with the mocap data to create the cinematics. Pickups were shot in the conference room on homemade cameras and some of the newly beefed-up animators squeezed themselves into Lycra to play Monkey (his 'distract a mech' shouting animation was filmed in this way).

At the same time, technical art director Adcock worked with the proprietary facial solver, a technological marvel that allowed the animators to capture the expressions on the actors' faces. "What the solver essentially does is sample each frame from the actor and identify what muscles are active on that frame," he explains. "It's not like a point cloud of data, it's values of different muscles in your face. When you've got that, you can map it onto other characters: Andy Serkis's facial expressions onto King Kong, for instance. If each muscle in the face is like a musical note, we're not trying to put one music track on another thing and distort or skew it to fit. Instead, we want to know what those notes are and read the music. When we know the music, we can play it on any instrument. It's a lot of maths, but also a lot of artistic contribution as well."

Q&A



Alessandro Taini
Visual art director for *Enslaved*, Ninja Theory

The game's overgrown cities are really effective. How did you envisage those levels?
I really like the idea of mixing the organic with the man-made. When thinking about the environments, one of the first things that we did was to concept a forest made entirely out of metal and cables. Your instincts were that it was something natural, but actually it was made from metal. I also think that colour is very important in expressing emotion, and we wanted the environments themselves to have an emotional impact.

What were your main influences?
When I was a child, I loved European comics, a style which is definitely evident in *Enslaved*. In particular, I was a big fan of Moebius, [Enki] Bilal and Juan Giménez. I'm also a big fan of the work of Hayao Miyazaki. In *Enslaved*, I wanted to capture the magic and lighting of the forest in Princess Mononoke.

How much of an influence was the TV documentary Life After People?
Life After People was useful in that it confirmed what we'd already been planning. We'd been working on the concept of nature reclaiming the Earth for quite a while, and when Life After People aired it really backed up what we'd been thinking. It also gave us a useful point of reference when it came to some of the specific details. For example, it allowed us to focus in on how grass would look in our scenario.

Unfortunately, such contributions were not destined to reach an enormous audience, and *Enslaved*'s disappointing sales performance slammed the door shut on a planned sequel. So, what went wrong? Well, one of the key complaints was that the gameplay, particularly the platforming, reduced players' skill requirements to the bare bones. Many were aggrieved that it was impossible to fall off a ledge. "No death in platforming is a step too far [for some players]," says Antoniades, who remains annoyed by the game mechanic conservatism. "I didn't want the platforming to be horribly challenging. The concept of falling to your death because you missed a jump isn't fun for me."

Instead, *Enslaved*'s relatively short singleplayer experience was designed to be finished, not to frustrate. After all, if you're a studio dedicated to telling stories, you want players to reach the end. And, unlike most game stories, *Enslaved*'s narrative was worth seeing through – not just for the emotional arc between Trip and Monkey, but also for an ending that raised questions about virtual worlds and the morality of enslaving people for their own good. "There were all kinds of meta-discussions going on in that game," says Garland. "The whole game can be seen as a metaphorical discussion of videogames."

The other issue that hampered the game's release was its marketing. Ninja Theory had thought that Namco Bandai – a big corporation, but a smaller publisher than, say, EA or Activision – would push the game hard. "For some reason that I don't really yet understand, it didn't achieve that attention," explains Antoniades. "I think the game could easily have sold more. There was a lot of promotion in England, and they did a really good job there, in London in particular. But outside of there, I don't think many people have heard of it. I don't think there was virtually anything in America."

Enslaved's continuing afterlife, however, is curious. Its disappointing reception nixed a sequel and even some of the mooted DLC (Ball says the team were close to developing a downloadable multiplayer online game featuring Monkey's 'cloud'). However, it received lots of critical praise and it remains a title that is held up as an example of effective videogame storytelling.

Last November, *Enslaved* also picked up a belated UK Writer's Guild Award for Best Video Game. Still, Antoniades remains undecided about its legacy. "I'm not sure. We wanted to create affecting characters that felt more like real people than cardboard cutouts. If the game had been more successful, perhaps other games would follow suit and deem it a worthwhile pursuit. But perhaps instead it will be held as an example of why it doesn't matter. Either way, it won't stop us from trying. I truly believe characters and story can elevate the gameplay and affect people in deep and satisfying ways." If the new-look Dante in Ninja Theory's *DmC* can connect with players on a new level, we'll know he's right. ■





Enslaved's memorable human characters – Trip, Monkey and Pigsy (left) – were brought to life via performance-capture shoots held at the House Of Moves studios (centre), which are based in LA



Monkey's hi-tech 'cloud' was planned to feature in a now-abandoned DLC multiplayer mode



Go west

"You've got a CG movie you could release here." That was filmmaker Peter Jackson's first comment when he saw *Heavenly Sword*'s cinematics at Weta Digital back in 2007 – high praise indeed from such a critically acclaimed director. So for *Enslaved*, Ninja Theory decided to put the Lord Of The Rings helmer's idea to the test and approached Hollywood studios with its tech. The idea was to get funding for *Enslaved* as a CG movie as well as a game, with one shoot sharing assets and thus lowering the costs. However, the development team was surprised to find little interest from the studios in its real-time technology. "There is a cultural and practical barrier that's stopping it from happening," says Antoniades. "The problem you run into is that we know the game industry really well. We don't know the movie industry at all. They're used to a certain way of working and funding. They have no interest in working in a new way."





Trip continues art director Alessandro Taini's love of flame-haired heroines: "When you see a woman with red hair, the impact is like a punch. My characters don't have a Gothic red, it's more like a Ferrari red"

What Games Are



TADHG KELLY

Ur-media? No, thanks. Transmedia, please

Jesse Schell writes in The Art Of Game Design: "All these other types of media [text, video, pictures, sound and more], and all media that is to come, are subsets of games. At their technological limit, games will subsume all other media." It's a pretty typical view, especially among folks who describe themselves as experience – rather than game – designers.

They posit that games are the ur-medium. The general idea is that because games contain other media, such as visual art or music, and play is a more engaging state of mind than watching or listening, all media will eventually gravitate toward games. Your story, album, poem and so on will become a part of a gameworld, as will all others.

Some games already act as sorts of living galleries. Many have a sense of story and they can feel alive, like whole other worlds. However, will they become the one medium to rule them all? Or does the ur-medium idea feel more like a power fantasy, a diversion from figuring out what the art of games actually is?

People who make games rarely consider themselves as more than service providers or engineers. They tend to shy away from thinking in terms of games as culture (never mind art). Developing a sense of legitimacy in what we create is a delicate and complicated conversation, and one way to avoid it is to create goals that are so impossibly tall, like a cliff stretching up into the clouds, they can never be attained.

To say that we will be artists when we are the kings of all arts is a kind of creative cowardice. If the cliff is so high that a game designer must be poet, author, engineer, rule maker and so on before the vision is made real, then of course nobody will ever achieve it. Meanwhile, we can all feel safe in not knowing.

Why do other arts need to be subsumed anyway? A game based on The Godfather is not inherently better than a book or soundtrack from the same source material. It is fun in some respects, such as being able to explore the world and complete missions on your own terms, but it's also much more abstract. The play brain (**E**234) renders any game down to its frame, so while *The Godfather* may spend time storytelling, the play brain doesn't really care about that.



Many games have stories and feel like whole other worlds. But will games become the one medium to rule them all?

There is an obvious difference between interactive and participant culture. In one, you actively do stuff with your hands (or other body parts) to cause a meaningful change. In the other, you watch, read or listen, and perhaps express your approval or disapproval. What value would there be in tying all of those things together into one giant universe that had to be played? When the interactive is worse than the participatory, doesn't it just get in the way?

The ur-medium idea is actually about justifying a superiority/inferiority complex brought on by the tendency of some parts of our culture to look down on games. Even though a few storied games sell millions of copies, the wider culture still tends to regard them as just an impressive thing to be played rather than a work of great insight, and experience designers tend to feel that most keenly.

I think they're picking the wrong fight. Legitimacy comes from within, rather than because some self-appointed art world pats us on the head, so the right fight is about how games are used for adaptation or creation as they are today, not in some mythical future.

Video didn't actually kill the radio star, film has not eaten literature or music, and modern art uses all sorts of cultural tropes without destroying them. Each adapts from the other, making good use of signifiers to convey meaning, but fans can still enjoy original forms if they choose. If they want to read Twilight, they read Twilight; they don't have to play the game to unlock the book.

A better way is transmedia publishing. Transmedia is clustered rather than hierarchical – where several items of interrelated media revolve around a franchise, but none is the definitive canon. Between them they convey a story, while permitting more works to evolve over time.

In the 'Cthulhu Mythos', there are short stories, novels, a couple of songs by Metallica, a time-honoured roleplaying game, plush toys, comics, movies and so on. Cthulhu is transmedia, and the Mythos allows for change and new ideas without impacting some overall grand narrative. So content makers are able to have fun with the material rather than slavishly copying it. No subsuming is needed and no far-off technology is required to make this happen. It already exists and is one way in which the culture of games shows itself (*Cthulhu Saves The World*) today.

Don't we want to be a part of a creative community rather than entertaining fantasies about how we'll show them one day? Isn't it a more positive future to be a part of the culture rather than stand apart from it, waiting for approval?

I think so. As gamers grow up, games are becoming acclimatised as a part of wider culture by default, but there will always be an interest in watching, reading and listening as well as play. We don't need to regard these activities as our enemy, but as our cousins, and we'll all get to play our part in the transmedia future to come.

Tadhg Kelly has worked in games, from tabletop to consoles, for nearly 20 years. Visit him at www.whatgamesare.com

In The Click Of It



CLINT HOCKING

And in between are the doors…

Very few people in the real world have reason to give much thought to doors. Architects wrangle over their placement, thieves plot their circumvention, firefighters consider their role in controlling the spread of a fire, and the police and army train around them. Aside from these folks, the rest of the world pretty much takes doors for granted. Except for game designers. Game designers have to view doors through the eyes of architects, thieves, firefighters, police officers and soldiers all at once, while simultaneously understanding that players still expect to take doors for granted.

Some games use doors for gating progression, introducing waves of enemies or surprising the player with monsters. Some games require a lot of tactical decision making around doors, while others don't have doors at all. Whatever the design, the impact doors can have on gameplay and on the underlying structures of the game itself should not be underestimated.

The original *Doom* used doors to gate progression. Classic 'red key, red door' structures enabled control of the flow and pacing. From the start of a level you might have been able to see the shotgun on the pedestal in the lab beyond the red door, but getting there would typically involve first getting through the blue door and the yellow door to get the red key. Once inside, you just knew all that anticipation was going to be paid off with something. Would it be the introduction of a new enemy? A floor that sank into lava? A bunch of hidden doors opening to reveal a horde of lesser monsters? Whatever it was, it was sure to be an even match – or at least mostly even – for your new shotgun. The point is that door design in *Doom* was used to reinforce higher level aesthetic goals such as building anticipation and paying it off, or developing environmental familiarity and then surprising the player by thwarting it – all suited to the game's horror theme.

In the case of *Skyrim*, doors are not part of gameplay, but are still a critical component of the game, acting as player-activated level transitions. Interacting with the door to a new area saves the game state on the current side of the door and loads the game state on the other side. This can be a tricky problem, since what the designers



Designers have to view doors through the eyes of architects, thieves, firefighters, police officers and soldiers all at once

decide to save (and the technical constraints that underlie those decisions) impacts the experience. If the complete AI state or the state of mid-air missile attacks is not saved, say, players could theoretically use doors as an exploit. What was originally 'the easy solution' for handling a sudden transition between two areas, each with hundreds of megabytes of art assets, can suddenly become a difficult design problem. How do you handle the case of a bandit who's set on killing the player pursuing him through the complete dump and reinitialisation of the world? Fortunately, Bethesda was up to those challenges, but it still took several games to implement its currently robust solutions.

Dead Space uses doors not only in support of its aesthetic goals, but also to dodge some technical issues. Bulkhead doors in *Dead Space* are 'powered' in the game's fiction, and from time to time interacting with a door will lead to a scripted power failure in the area. As with *Doom*, such a failure can pay off built-up anticipation or thwart expectation with a sudden swarm of enemies. Additionally, doors in *Dead Space* seem to be linked to the streaming engine. Not only can a scripted failure and ambush give the engine time to stream in assets for the next location, but the time even a functioning door takes to open can be dynamically stretched to accommodate the streaming in of assets on the other side.

In tactical games, such as *Rainbow Six*, *Splinter Cell* or *SWAT*, doors are notoriously complex. In *Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory* doors were not only used for level segregation and streaming, but were also a core ingredient in the gameplay. The player could open doors normally, stealthily, or bash them down with force. He could see under them with his optic cable, or through them with his thermal vision. Bullets could penetrate them if the doors were the right material. They could be unlocked, or locked, or attached to keypads or retinal scanners, and any of these locking methods could be circumvented. The AI could use them, fight through them and around them, and could even detect if they were left open, or if the lock had been tampered with.

Games in the *Splinter Cell* series have always had a very high interaction density, and because the gameplay is focused on being in close proximity to aware enemy agents while your character is performing complex, subtle and potentially detectable actions, this degree of complexity in the door design was appropriate to support the games' aesthetic goals.

The doors of *Splinter Cell*, which slow the pacing tremendously and amplify tension around them, would be no more appropriate in *Doom* than 'red key, red door' structures would be in Sam Fisher's world. The art of game design is not in seeing features you like in other games and including them in yours, it's in designing features to suit the kind of game you are making and the experiences you want to encourage.

Clint Hocking is a creative director at LucasArts working on an unannounced project. He blogs at www.clicknothing.com

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The Possibility Space



RANDY SMITH

May contain adult content

The older I get, the less games appeal to me – a sad but common story. Our almost-done *Waking Mars* is, among other things, an attempt to address this: a game intended to be acceptable to adult tastes. Say one evening you find yourself in mature grown-up mode and seeking entertainment. What about a solid, worthwhile film or novel satisfies you? And if most games fall correspondingly short, then how?

I love smut, but sadly that's not what I mean by 'adult'. *Spider* skimmed over topics equally inappropriate for kids, such as suicide and alcoholism, but it's not darkness that makes subject matter mature either, since anything can become as degenerate as a fart joke if that's your aim. Sophisticated consumers look for material they haven't digested dozens of times before: a fresh premise, or a perspective considered with depth and insight. So *Waking Mars* isn't about invading space fleets, but some of the more enigmatic aspects of sci-fi – the unfathomable distances, durations, and conditions of the Universe, next to which Earth's entire history is a tiny and familiar bubble. What would humans learn if we were to encounter life beyond our earthly assumptions?

You know when fantasy games open with a voice introducing a magical realm and the evil forces that have befallen it? That's awesome, sure, but it also smacks of simple-mindedness. *Waking Mars*, like some other games, avoids exposition in favour of modern storytelling techniques, such as starting the story in the middle and introducing characters by way of demonstration. This is akin to movies that require some mental engagement to unravel the narrative, creating appeal out of the task of piecing together subtle cues into cohesive understanding. These films assume the audience is intelligent, which makes any lesser treatment tiresome. The approach feels comfortably adult in *Waking Mars*, but it doesn't work as well. Here's why: imagine you're trying to watch a movie, but first you have to figure out where to sit, which direction to face, and which eye to open to see the film, to say nothing about interpreting its content. The physical act of consuming a film is simple and familiar, which means the medium can jump right in with themes and characters, establish the trajectory of the work, and generally be clever



Too often the first things out of characters' mouths are thinly veiled contrivances explaining what the game is

and sophisticated. *Waking Mars* has to use that same bandwidth to calibrate the player, explaining what the game is and how to play it. Do I control an avatar directly? If so, with what viewpoint? Am I supposed to create this or destroy that? One type of bandwidth I'm referring to is the player's attention span. With all the focus on what the game is, storytelling nuance gets lost.

Another type of bandwidth is dialogue. Too often in games, the first things out of characters' mouths are thinly veiled contrivances explaining what the game is. For *Waking Mars*, we wanted all dialogue to be honest to our characters. This failed in two ways: it was too ambiguous to explain anything reliably, and produced too much text. Dialogue meant to be perfectly natural and introduce the themes, gameplay and characters was just too long. We reduced the word count by shifting the burden of training to an objectives system, which communicates directly from design to player, and is far cleaner than characters fumbling across the fourth wall while pretending they aren't. We also implemented 'depth on demand' training, which assumes players can figure it out and becomes more explicit only when needed, resulting in fewer interruptions and a cosier fit than 'one size fits all' static training.

But there's a bigger question: why have dialogue at all? The interactive medium doesn't become more advanced by injecting novels into games. Of course players don't want to read text; it so rarely connects meaningfully to their experience. *Waking Mars* draws from the library of interactive-appropriate tools, with environmental storytelling, branching objectives, and interactive demonstrations. So a theme of the game is ecosystems, and you hear characters talk about them, find them during exploration, and tinker with them to observe their responses. The interweaving of these perspectives on the same material is intended to be the full package.

The real excuse, though, is that until we have truly interactive characters, static dialogue is our best tool for conveying the human experience with anything approaching the depth and insight provided by even a modestly talented film actor. The role dialogue plays in our game's package of themes is to contemplate a personal relationship to the unearthly and suggest reasons you should care. Even on alien worlds, the human experience is crucial – in fact, it's arguably the bottom line of all entertainment. This seems important enough to justify static text. Unfortunately, there's no way to know a payoff is coming, as opposed to more outpouring from an indulgent writer. I'm torn, but I generally believe the tone of trust and patience vs instant gratification is pretty adult.

So examining novel topics with a human perspective; assuming you're patient, intelligent, and paying attention; leveraging modern storytelling techniques – might this approach be enough to satisfy your inner grown-up?

Randy Smith is the co-owner of Tiger Style, whose second game, Waking Mars, *is very nearly ready. No, really*

Word Play



JAMES LEACH

The case for caring

Playing computer games is so much better if you care. Yes, care. I was going to write, 'invest a degree of emotional input', or some other modern-speakish nonsense, but there's nothing wrong with the word 'care'. Unless you've been brought up in it, whereupon the term might open a can of wormy memories.

Designers and game writers are delighted that players care. It's seen as a victory. "We've successfully got into the brain of the player," they whoop. Then they high-five awkwardly, in that wannabe American way, and don't bother to ask what it is the player is caring about. I think they'd be surprised if they did.

Here's what's happening: if a player spends several hours with a game, and uses skill, concentration and perhaps a bit of luck to make decent headway, they're going to care. Not because the characters are engaging or fascinating, or the landscapes are gorgeous, or the story is riveting, but simply because they've put in the work. Anyone who's doing well at a difficult piece of DIY will feel the same thing. 'This is going well,' they think. 'I must concentrate, because I really don't want to screw it all up and have to start again.'

People also care because they want to win. They want to achieve victory and see the game come to an end. In other words, they've experienced it from start to finish and have thus got value for money (in the sense that there aren't likely to be swathes of gameplay they haven't battled through). Also, they've won, and people like winning – just ask Charlie Sheen.

Players also care more if they feel they're being rewarded as they play, especially if they think they're being particularly clever or skilful. Imagine this in-game scenario: you can snipe some guards and enter a boss's lair through the front, which is hard but doable. However, if you take your time and scout around, you'll discover a secret way in via an air duct, thus enabling you to get in unnoticed and without a shot being fired, which is so much more satisfying. Your smartness has been anticipated by the game's makers and rewarded. You like them for recognising how clever you are and for catering for your genius, and so care more about their product.



Designers are delighted players care. It's seen as a victory. They don't ask what players are caring about

A lot of players, though by no means all, care more if they're made to laugh, too. Funny, cute or charming things have an attractive effect on us, and we're well disposed towards things that make us giggle. Hence the adulation of Charlie Brooker.

Right then, here's what people arguably don't care about when they play games: being cast as a stubbly, no-necked balding white man with little to say who's suffering a run of terrible luck in a tough world. Yes, we might raise a smile if our dour, sweaty protagonist mumbles a cynical catchphrase once in a while, but to be honest I think we're over the ex-forces, post-traumatic guys with implausibly apt surnames.

Another thing players don't care about much is the welfare of NPCs in a game. If you're over seven years old, you'll know that they don't exist, their suffering or tribulations aren't real and that they're only designed to give you a reason to do what you're already doing because you bought the game and have every intention of ploughing through the damn thing to win and/or to get your money's worth (see earlier). Also, by the same token that makes us like developers that reward our efforts to find different ways of doing things, we don't like ones that resort to cheap heart-string-tugging plot elements involving saving and protecting things that are too pathetic to look after themselves. And have heads that are too large for their bodies and big eyes.

Players will cease to care about anything if they've been let down or if they feel cheated. No matter how great your game turns out to be, if there are bugs, important plot holes or it tricks players knowingly early on, they're never going to fall in love with it. It needs the integrity and internal consistency of a good movie or TV show. Players need to be able to trust it. Trust it to work, to deliver the same quality throughout, and to reward them fairly. (See earlier, somewhere else.)

A while back, I worked on a project of rare and stunning beauty and depth. Reading through the story and dialogue that already existed, I was taken by the richness, the essential human emotion it contained. If people were going to care about a game, truly care about it, they'd care about this one. It was called *Milo And Kate*, and it's never going to see the light of day.

Perhaps care is the wrong word after all. Maybe we're supposed to just enjoy games: enjoy the action and the graphics, get driven onward by good plot, and have our imaginations rewarded with decent characters and well-written, fresh dialogue. Yes, we want to see what happens next, to influence events and to do things that satisfy us. We want to use our brains as well as our trigger fingers. That's what's important – we spend the money and have a great time, so it's worth every penny. If the gameplay, game length, graphics, skill and reward levels, plot, characters, and story aren't great, then we've been done. And we should all care about that.

James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer who works on games and for ad agencies, TV, radio and online

Region Specific: Texas, US

A big state with even bigger ambitions for its game industry

For a regional game industry with such a mighty track record, Texas isn't about to rest on its laurels. Dallas-based developers, for example, continue to make some of the most impressive shooters on the market. Id Software is still finding new ways to push the limits of graphics technology with its stunning id Tech 5 engine, used to great effect in *Rage* (1), and Gearbox, another Dallas local, takes its bullet-spraying mayhem in a more visually stylised direction with projects such as *Borderlands 2* (2). A bit farther south, BioWare Austin has reason to celebrate, since the launch of MMOG *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (3) went as smoothly as a studio could hope. Texas's videogame incentive program continues to entice publishers to increase their footprint in the area, too; the EA Sports (4) label has announced plans to establish a development presence in Austin. And while the demise of Ensemble Studios (5) was tragic, its talent has filtered into exciting new ventures such as Robot Entertainment, which has just released its first iOS game, *Hero Academy*. Meanwhile, the University of Houston is partnering with *Section 8* (6) developer TimeGate Studios in nearby Sugar Land to create a solid curriculum for future game degrees. The indie spirit is alive and well, too, with an enthusiastic collective called Juegos Rancheros (7) recently formed in Austin.









3







1



2

FRONTIER SPIRIT



3

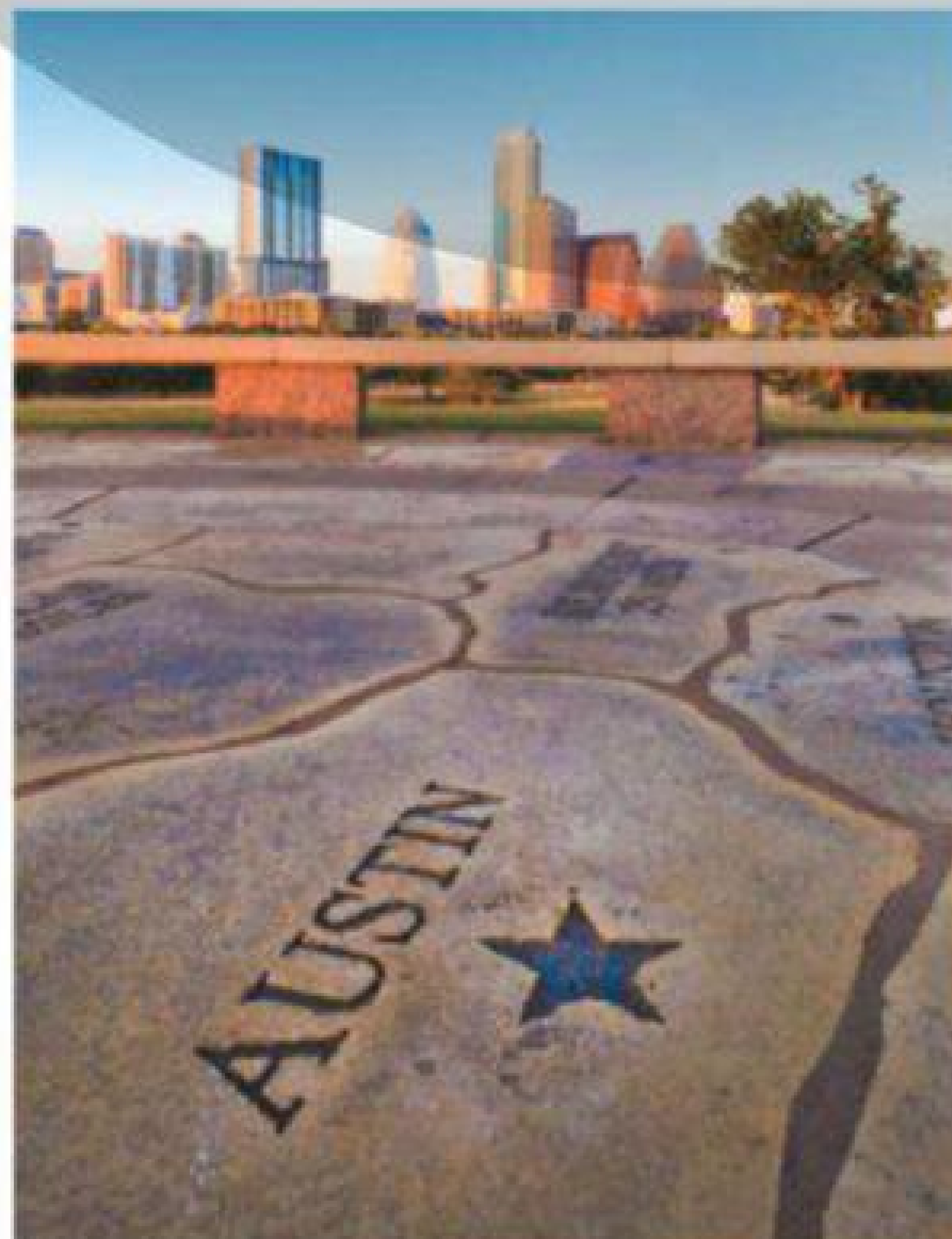


How the Lone Star State is setting the pace for the US game industry

5

4

LANDMARKS
1 The Texas State Capitol building is located in Austin, Texas. 2 The Texas Star in Dallas is the tallest Ferris wheel in North America. 3 The Texas flag's single star remains a symbol of the state's unity and its independence. 4 A scenic view of Houston's skyline from the riverside. 5 Austin is the capital of Texas and was settled in the 1830s by pioneers, who originally named the outpost Waterloo





Last July, Texas governor Rick Perry stood behind a podium at EA BioWare's North Austin offices – flanked by two chuffed EA executives – and announced that the publisher would be expanding its operations in Texas. The plan is expected to create 300 new jobs in the city, spanning across programming, art, and customer support. EA Sports will also be setting up a new branch to complement its teams in Orlando and Burnaby. And with at least 167 game development outfits already in the state, employing nearly 5,000 people, Texas is currently surpassed only by California in terms of industry presence.

Even that seat of influence is shifting in Texas's favour, as evidenced by EA's efforts in recent years to reduce staff levels in its California headquarters and focus growth on places such as the Lone Star State, where the cost of doing business is far lower. In 2007, the company employed about 2,800 people in California, according to EA president Frank Gibeau, but that number has dwindled to fewer than 1,700 at present.

"Low-cost development is certainly an issue," says EA Sports COO **Daryl Holt**. "We look for ways to supplement our high-cost locations for things that make sense in terms of where we find talent. Austin has that ready-made gaming talent."

The incentives don't hurt either. Back in 2007, Texas was one of the first states in the US to roll out a videogame incentive, recognising the quality of the jobs – technical and well-salaried – that fuel game development. The Texas Moving Image Industry Incentive Program, operated by the Texas Film Commission, became an even more attractive prospect for developers last August, when the incentive cap for videogames was raised from five per cent to 17.5 per cent – now on a par with the cap enjoyed by the film and television industry.

Other states in the US have rushed out similar incentive programmes, but Texas maintains a key advantage. "[With] the states that try to dive in, the money's going to be attractive," says **Evan Fitzmaurice**, director of the Texas Film Commission. "But videogame companies and publishers that are thinking about setting up brick-and-mortar operations that have longer lives [aren't] going to respond solely to incentive dollars. They need to know that they're moving to an area where they can hire people, because this is sophisticated work. You can relocate some people, but you can't basically flip the switch and overnight create an industry where there's never been a history or foundation laid."

It's impossible to overstate the impact Texas has had on videogames, too. Rewind to 1979 and you've got Richard Garriott selling his seminal *Akalabeth* RPG in Ziploc bags out of the computer store where he worked in Clear Lake City, like some kind of tech-narcotics dealer. He would go on to found Origin in Austin, create the *Ultima* series and lay the D&D-engraved cornerstones of the videogame RPG genre. In stealth action, *Deus Ex* would be developed down the road at Ion Storm's Austin offices under the leadership of Warren Spector. Today Texas is the home of everything from BioWare's MMORPG *Star Wars: The Old Republic* to indie projects such as Semi Secret's *Canabalt* and Tiger Style's iOS hit *Spider: The Legend of Bryce Manor*. A collective called Juegos Rancheros has even popped up to keep Austin's indie community in closer contact.


The easily recognised Texas Longhorn steer has a strong cultural tie back to the region's early frontier ranching days

The FPS has its birthplace and Mecca just 200 miles north of Austin in Dallas. Here, id Software changed the gaming world forever with Doom back in 1993

The most commercially successful genre on the planet today, the FPS, has its birthplace and Mecca just 200 miles north of Austin in Dallas. Here, id Software changed the gaming world forever with *Doom*'s release back in 1993, and QuakeCon continues to offer the largest LAN party in North America to id-worshiping pilgrims from around the globe. Dallas's shooter legacy carries on to this day with developers such as Gearbox continuing to fly the banner next to their elder statesmen. Demonstrating the tight-knit solidarity of the Dallas development community, Gearbox even came alongside Triptych – the remnant of the developers who worked on *Duke Nukem Forever* at 3D Realms – and helped them ship the famously beleaguered project.

Although Houston enjoys less notoriety than Austin or Dallas, its limited AAA studio presence – *Section 8* maker TimeGate Studios operates out of nearby suburb Sugar Land – is complemented by a thriving serious games scene. Petrochemical companies in the area, such as BP and Exxon, are exploring the use of virtual environments as collaborative tools, and Archimage has received numerous grants from the National Institutes Of Health and the Center For Disease Control And Prevention to develop games to educate youth about nutrition and disease prevention. The presence of the renowned Texas Medical Center and surrounding universities has also sparked lots of game development in the educational sector.

Texas prides itself on the quality of education being delivered to the next generation of game developers. The University Of Texas at Austin has recently added a game development specialisation to its nationally ranked computer science department. The Guildhall at Southern Methodist University developed its curriculum in 2003 hand in hand with the leading lights of the Texas game industry to create arguably the most respected graduate game development course in the nation. University of Houston has woven outstanding games coursework into its computer science degree programmes, resulting in the best record among US universities at Microsoft's Imagine Cup. "Working with motivated students with strong computing skills has provided us with a competitive edge" says game development instructor **Dr Chang Yun**.

True to its enduring cowboy iconography, Texas has an aura of frontier spirit that suits the wide-open possibility space presented by game development. "When people think about Texas as a cowboy culture," says **Aaron Thibault**, Gearbox's VP of product development, "I'd say what that's really about is that we're not afraid to take risks and be innovative and put ourselves out there." With such promising emerging talent, and experienced developers to nurture it to maturity, the momentum of Texas's game industry seems about as unstoppable as a Longhorn stampede. ■

Tricks of the trade

Texas's world-class education system prepares the next wave of pro developers





Adel Chaveleh, TimeGate Studios president & CEO (top); Tim McLaughlin, head of Texas A&M University's department of visualisation

When was the last time you saw a developer's motion-capture studio and it was painted with the colours and emblem of a local university? Well, that's precisely how Houston's TimeGate Studios, developer of the sci-fi shooter *Section 8*, has decorated its new facilities, which were built as a joint project between the studio and the University Of Houston. It's a powerful symbol of the close ties between Texas's game development community and educational institutions.

TimeGate's senior leadership is also helping the university's computer science department develop the curriculum for an upcoming game development master's programme, as well as offering work experience in the form of large internship classes at its Sugar Land-based HQ. In return, the developer is able to use the mocap studio for its own commercial purposes.

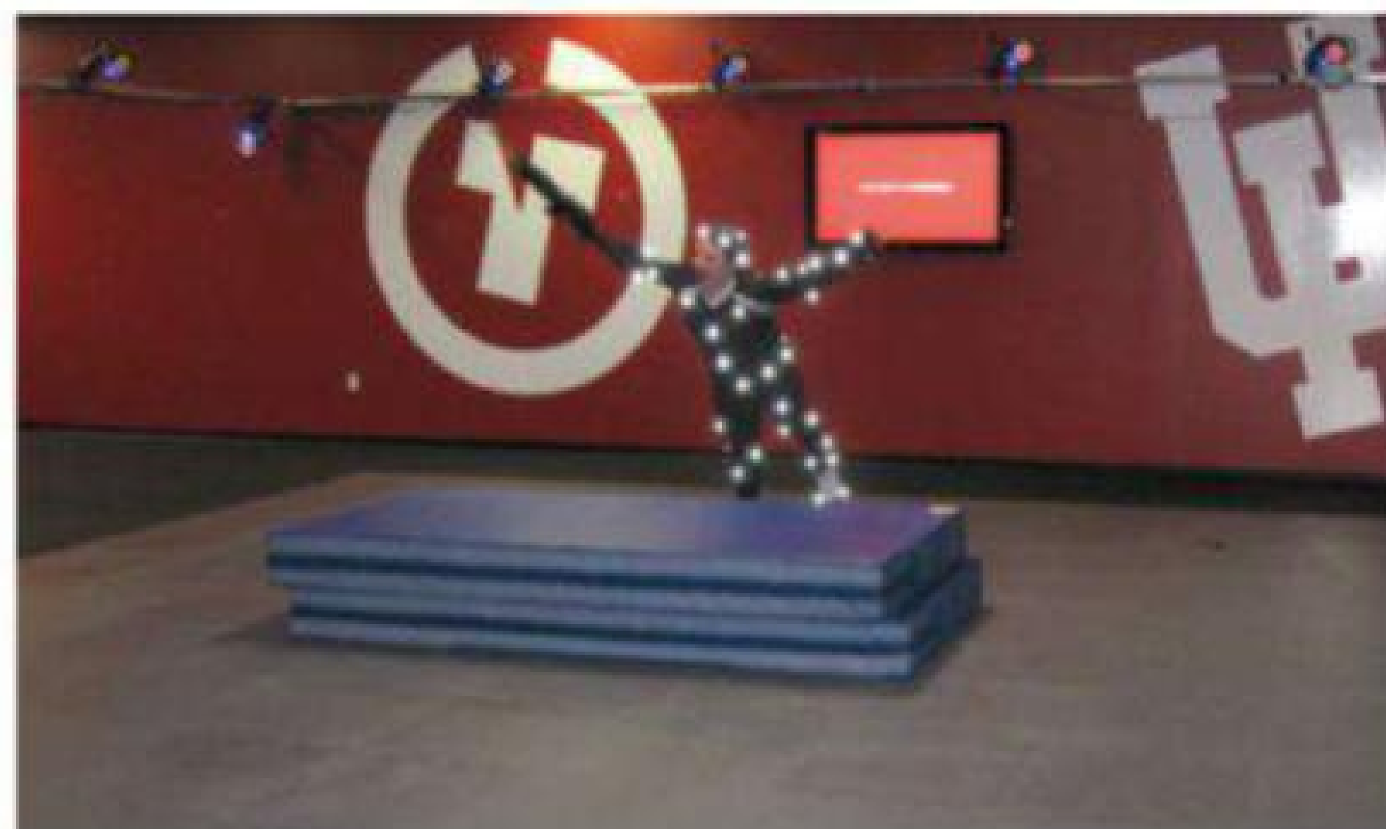
"The motion-capture studio served as the classroom for this internship programme," says **Adel Chaveleh**, TimeGate's president and CEO. "Over the course of that semester [starting August 2011], they built an entire game and leveraged the motion capture for their project. But they were in the environment of a game studio, as opposed to a lab on campus, which I think adds a special edge."

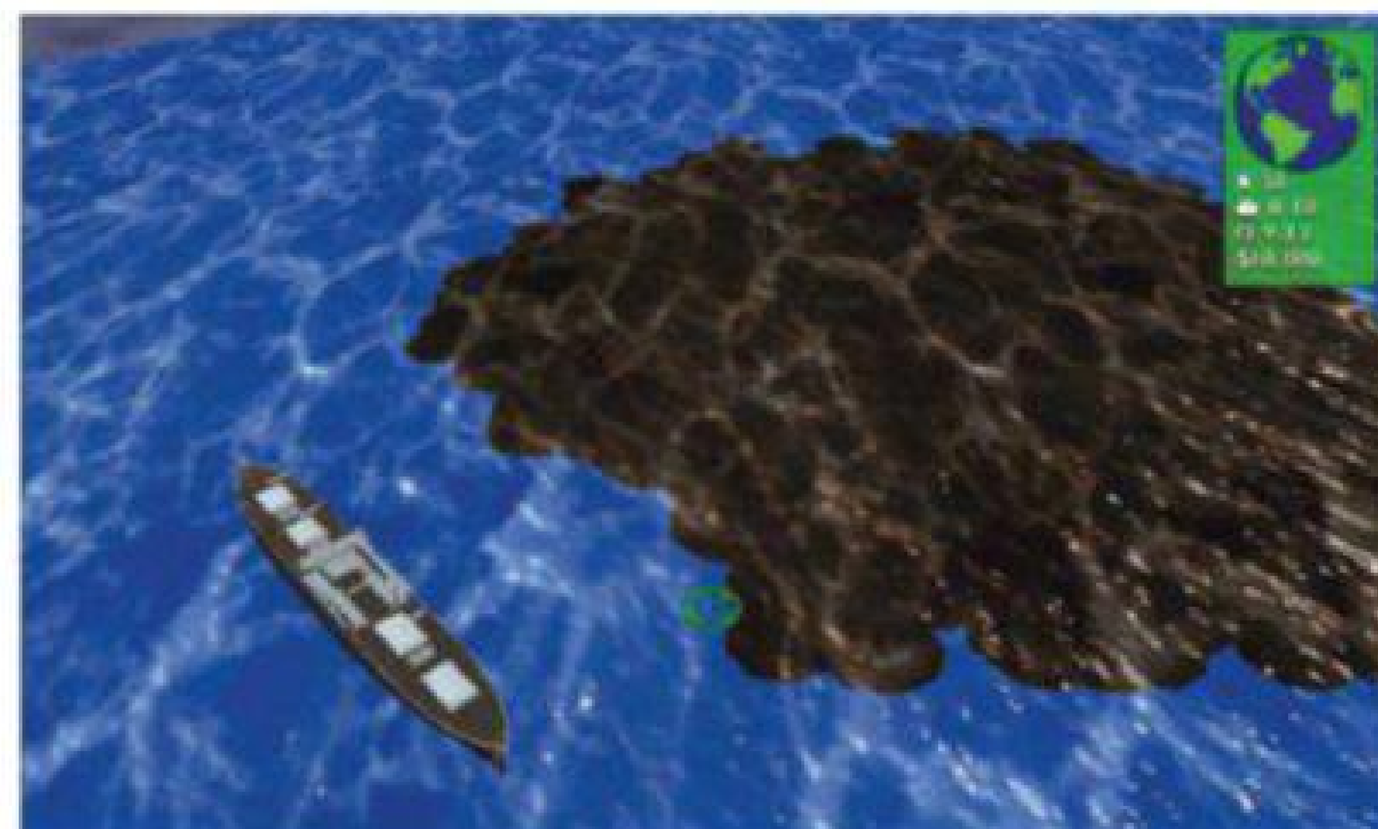


Three University of Houston teams have been selected as finalists for Microsoft's US Imagine Cup 2012, the premier student gaming competition focused on using technolgoy to confront societal problems

Just as the building of a successful game requires extensive collaboration between a studio's various disciplines, the building of a successful regional game industry requires equally close collaboration between game companies and the education system that's feeding talent into the system. As such, the University Of Texas at Austin recently rolled out a game degree of its own. "I have been working with other people in the gaming community to establish a programme at UT for ten years, and finally it is now becoming a reality," says **Richard Vogel**, BioWare Austin's executive producer and VP of production, who sits on the programme's advisory board. The first group of students to have that game design specialisation will graduate in 2013.

Texas A&M University's department of visualisation takes a balanced approach, cultivating both artistic and technical skills in tandem. Its graduates go on to work in game and film studios all over the world. "We're a bit different from other programmes," says Viz Lab department head and associate professor **Tim McLaughlin**. "Many programmes have a computer science emphasis where art and aesthetics is minimised. Others have an art and design angle where tech and logic are a minor part. We treat them as equal parts across the board." ■





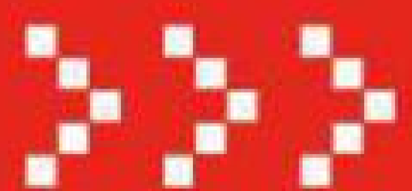
TimeGate's mocap studio (left) was built in partnership with the University Of Houston, and *SpillVille*, a student project, won honours at Microsoft's Imagine Cup

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The Guildhall at SMU

Texas's marquee graduate-level game programme is serious business



Founded 2003
Location Plano, Texas
Employees Nine full-time staff, 14 full-time faculty, four adjuncts
Key staff Dr Peter Raad (executive director), Ron Jenkins (deputy director, development and external affairs), Gary Brubaker (deputy director of academics)
URL www.bit.ly/waVYQX



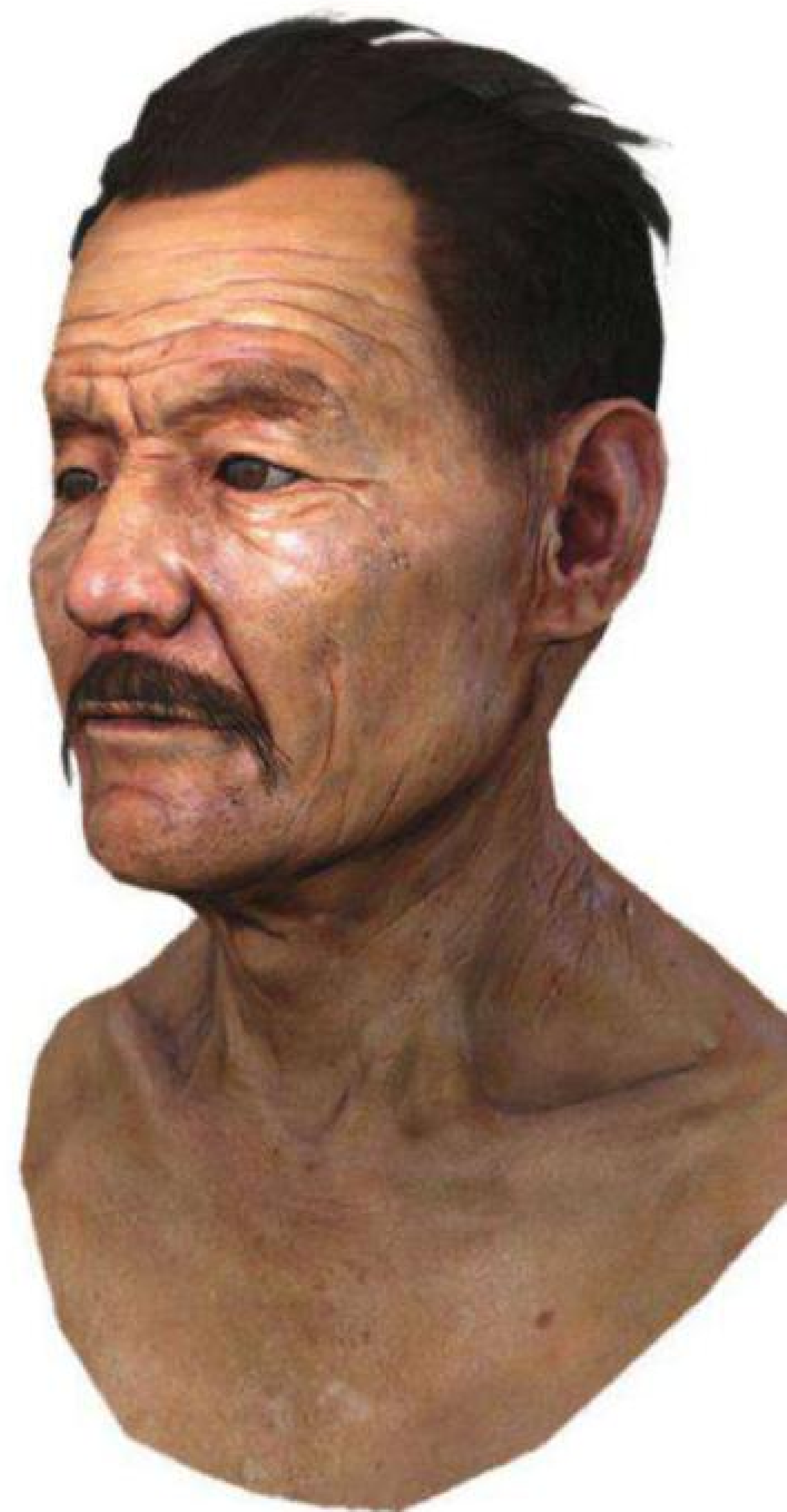
Skyrim's lead level designer, *Doom 4*'s lead programmer, Insomniac's creative director: these developers share something in common, bar the fact that they hold key leadership positions in some of the industry's most respected studios. All three individuals graduated from The Guildhall, an intensive two-year master's programme that operates out of the Linda and Mitch Hart eCenter at Southern Methodist University (SMU) in the Dallas suburb of Plano.

Roughly 45 students enter the programme per admission (twice a year) in groups known as 'cohorts', which reflect a careful balance of disciplines across art, level design, programming and production. In addition to classroom instruction delivered by the faculty's veteran developers, The Guildhall's project load escalates rapidly, with increasingly complex games developed by multi-disciplinary student teams. Balancing personal work and projects can require students to devote anywhere between 50-100 hours each week. Only serious aspiring developers need apply.

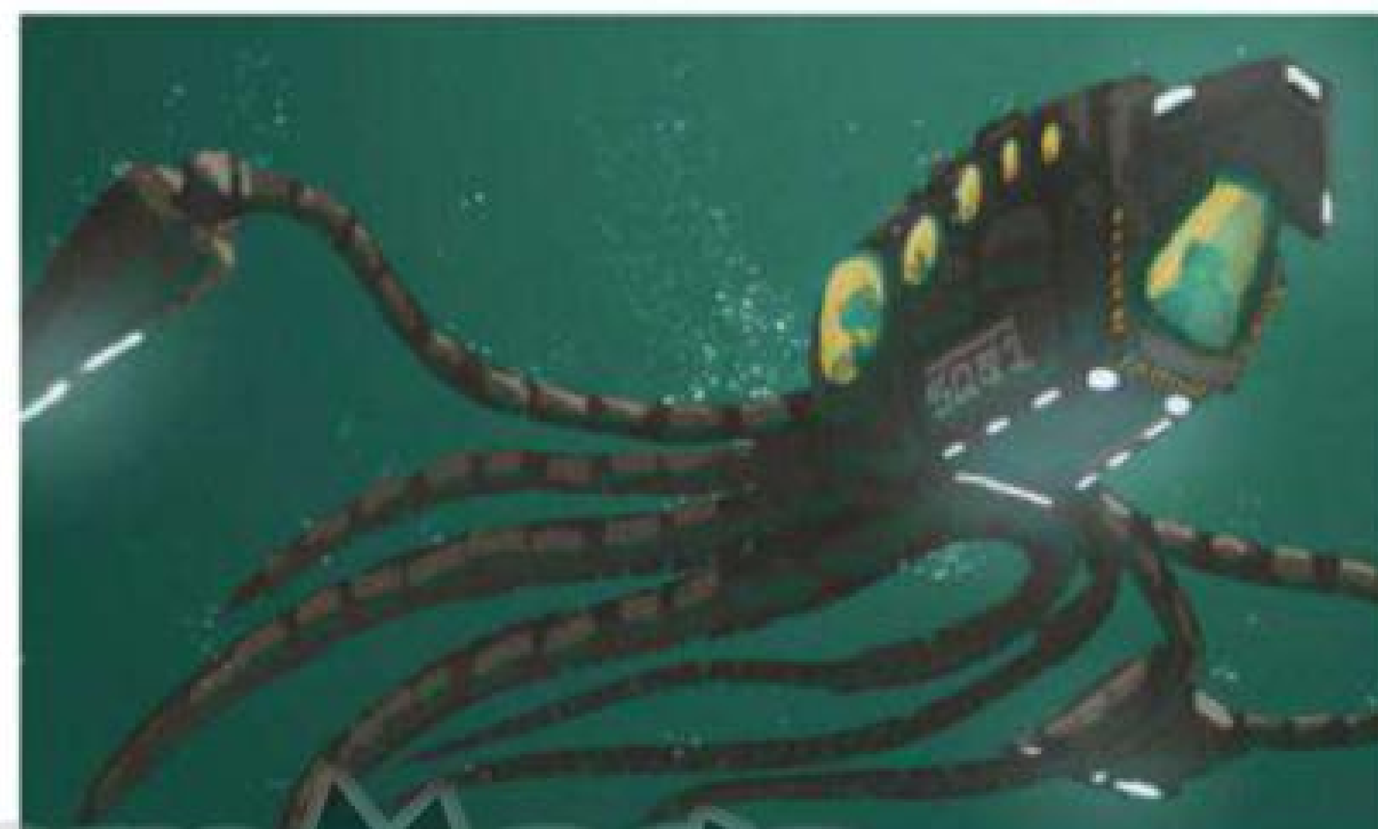
"I've been a fan and supporter of SMU's programme since its inception," says **Steve Nix**, GameStop's general manager of digital distribution, and former id Software senior excutive. "I think we helped [Dr Raad] do it the right way when we recommended that it be a graduate level professional development programme for artists, designers, producers and programmers based on large team production. They've graduated 14 cohorts and I've made it to almost every graduation. It's amazing the footprint the programme now has in the industry."

The concept for The Guildhall was born in late 2002, when local industry heavyweights such as John Romero, Tom Hall and Randy Pitchford approached SMU's **Dr Peter Raad** about launching a game design programme. Traditional HR channels weren't supplying them with people who could show up to work on day one knowing how to move at the pace of the game industry. They needed a programme that would deliver battle-tested recruits who were vetted and reliable. So Raad worked hand-in-hand with them to shape the curriculum.

"It's the only way to do it, if you're honest with yourself and listen intently to the industry," he says. "We did not have the typical academic self-centeredness that we know everything, the mindset that says, 'We're going to build it and you're going to love it.' We thought, 'If we're going to build something from scratch, let's start with the end in mind and build backwards. I'm going to listen to the neurosurgeons if I'm putting a neurosurgery programme together.'"



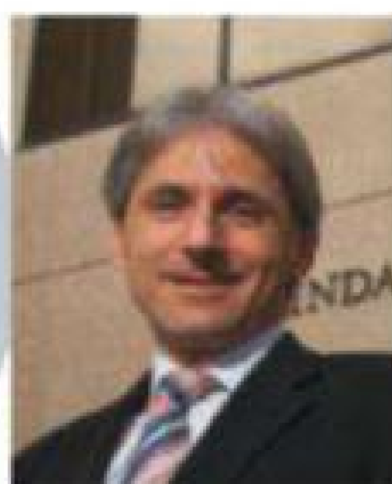




The student art on this page was made by: Alex Nguyen (elderly man), Alfonso Callejas (submarine), Jordan Ewing (swamp creature), Haryati Mohdehsan (girl)



COURSE INSIGHT
Dr Peter Raad
Founder and executive director



What inspired The Guildhall's approach and educational philosophy?
Think of a med school, or dental school, or a conservatory. Maybe you're learning the fundamentals of theatre, but at some point you've got to perform. And not every piece is a solo piece; sometimes you've got to perform with other actors, and you've got to understand what the lighting is doing, and what the grip does, and what the people behind the stage do. So those were the models. The important thing about The Guildhall at SMU is that it walks a sweet spot between learning what to do and how to do it, and then I've got to do it, and finally do it with others.

Is the mounting complexity of AAA games making education more essential?
The industry is filled with amazing, highly successful people who were self-taught in the field of games, and, frankly, they did great without really needing academic enterprise. The problem with that is two-fold. It's difficult to teach yourself things that you don't know. How do you know what you don't know? You're spending a lot of years trying to figure things out, and many times it's a lot of dead ends. And the other thing that's difficult about it is the fact that it's incomplete. If you're doing it by yourself, maybe you're doing programming, art or design, or maybe you're learning production. But you're never learning all the other parts, which is [what's] so different between videogame development and any other field that I've come across. It forces you to leverage the expertise of others continuously.

There's a very pragmatic ethos that seems to drive what you're doing.
I tell the students here, there's a big difference between being a hobbyist and being a professional. To be a professional is to get paid, which means that I have a responsibility. This is about commercial art, commercial programming, commercially viable design and production. We don't do it for the sake of doing it, we do it because there's a product at the end of the line, and that product is a societal product. It's something that society is going to accept or reject.

You're extremely selective in your admissions. Are there plans to expand?
I would love to, but here's the catch-22: if you want a Guildhall, then you have to have people leaving the videogame industry. Not when they're sour on it, but when they're at their best. I've got 14 full-time faculty here and between three and six adjuncts any semester, and they've all shipped games… So if I want to keep the student-to-faculty ratio small, that means I've got to double my faculty. Where the heck am I going to find another 20 people? It's a difficult proposition.



What feedback do you hear from studios about your graduates?
The feedback we get from the industry is that, on day one on the job, it seems as if our new graduates have already been working in the industry for three to five years. Because of the two-year condensed effort, when they get to a videogame studio they already know what it is to work with others. They already know what a milestone is. They already know agile production principles… So they hit the ground running and immediately they begin to rise through the ranks. There are 30-some-odd Guildhall alumni at BioWare Austin, and their leader said publicly that without The Guildhall, they wouldn't have been able to ship *The Old Republic*. ■



THQ shares a usability and playtesting lab with The Guildhall (centre). Students begin by making games in small teams (above)

Austin

This culturally vibrant university town is quickly becoming the US's videogame capital





Michael Wilford (top), studio director for Twisted Pixel, which was recently acquired by Microsoft, and Richard Vogel, executive producer at BioWare Austin

When Twisted Pixel – the studio behind *The Gunstringer* – decided to relocate from Madison, Indiana, to Austin in late 2008, every member of its staff came along. Even some friends who'd been volunteering their services on a part-time basis for free insisted on following the studio south. A range of options had been considered, but the warm weather, low cost of living, deep talent pool, lack of a state income tax and budget incentives ultimately tipped the balance to the city. Twisted Pixel was hard at work at the time on XBLA hit *'Splosion Man* and desperately needed to grow its staff.

"We used a recruiter to try to bring people to Indiana," explains studio director **Michael Wilford**, "and we got like one person. It's hard to convince people to move from California when the main perk of your area is basically a Taco Bell that's open until 2am. Since moving to Austin, we've hired people from California and Seattle who'd say, 'Yeah, I used to live in Austin and have just been looking for a way to come back ever since,' so recruitment has been really easy."

But it's not just indies flocking to the area. All major publishers have a presence in the state, and EA has been aggressively expanding its footprint in the city. "I'm very happy that EA has decided to invest more in Austin," says **Richard Vogel**, executive producer of *Star Wars: The Old Republic* and vice president of production at BioWare Austin. "Everyone benefits from this, not just BioWare. The more opportunities there are in the area, the easier it is to attract good talent to come to Austin."

The collision of various creative disciplines makes Austin a conducive environment for making games

Austin has a long legacy of development, going back to Richard Garriott's Origin (which made *Ultima* and *Wing Commander*), and Ion Storm Austin (*Deus Ex*, *Thief: Deadly Shadows*). It also has stature in the MMOG space, serving as the initial western headquarters of Korean publisher NCsoft and bolstered by companies such as BioWare Austin and the branch of *Rift* developer Trion Worlds responsible for building and maintaining the company's server tech.



Austin has become one of the premier destinations for US game development, and games are a growing part of its creative culture

This reputation for great games is what inspired French studio Arkane, currently working on stealth-action game *Dishonored*, to set up a branch in the area. And having operations in the city seems to graft a studio into that lineage of greatness; now Arkane CEO Raphael Colantonio works alongside *Deus Ex* designer Harvey Smith, with both sharing the tile of co-creative director.

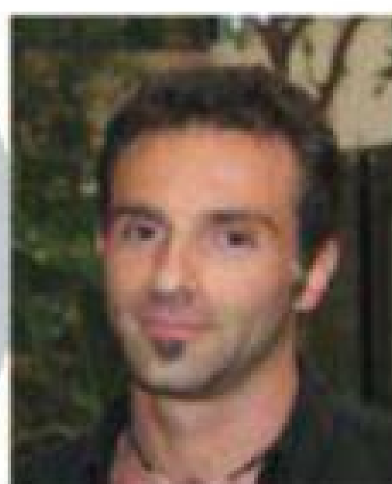
The city's unofficial 'keep Austin weird' motto points to the value the local community places on free thinking. This cultural identity is reflected in the presence of the annual South By Southwest festival, which began as a musical showcase and has since grown to include everything from film to interactive arts. The collision of these various creative disciplines makes Austin a sublimely conducive environment for videogames, which tend to revel in that Venn diagram overlap of music, film and technology.

What's more, the world's largest genre film festival, Fantastic Fest, has recently partnered with local indie games collective Juegos Rancheros (see p164) to create year-round events to complement its Fantastic Arcade programme. On the educational front, the decision by local institution University Of Texas at Austin to establish a game development degree simply reinforces the sense that Austin's potential influence in the videogame space has no level cap whatsoever.





ARKANE STUDIOS
Raphael Colantonio
CEO and co-creative director
Harvey Smith
Co-creative director





Why did you choose Austin as the home for Arkane's US branch?
Raphael Colantonio The reason why we came to Austin is that Origin and Ion Storm Austin were here. And both of those companies made some of the biggest, greatest games. It seemed like a great terrain for finding game designers and developers in general who share the same values as we do. I'm talking about games like *Deus Ex*, the *Ultima* series, *Wing Commander* – any of those big games that had interesting simulation aspects to them.

Has joining the ZeniMax family with id Software and Bethesda Softworks given rise to any collaboration?
Harvey Smith One of the best things about it is how much overlap there is. Bethesda is not a big, publicly traded company. This is shocking to any developer who's ever worked for a publicly traded company. They are a small group of guys who care a lot about depth in games and about cohesive worlds. Immediately, we were getting feedback on our game from the guys on the *Skyrim* team. We respect their games and they respect our games. Instead of the guy who's [simply focused on business concerns] you're dealing with the guy who loves games and very much wants the game to be good.

After contracting on *BioShock 2*, was it quite a change to work on *Dishonored*, where you have more freedom to shape the IP?
RC [They're] two different experiences and both are very interesting. It was very fun to work on *BioShock 2*, and it's also very fun to work on our own game. One was relaxing in terms of not having some of the responsibilities, so I didn't feel frustrated by it. But, of course, it's always exciting to work on your own IP.
HS I didn't really get to work on the *BioShock* contract, but Raph and Christophe [Carrier, audio director] and some of our level designers did. But I've gotta say, I've worked on a lot of new IP in my career, and it's not always better. It's exciting to work on new IP, that's true. We love it. But for every excitement, there's a problem, a new thing to solve, right?

What are the biggest design challenges you're solving now in *Dishonored*?
RC Some of it is exposing the choices to the player in the purest way. Even though it's not an open world, it's mission based, each one of the maps has its own sandbox aspect, so you're given a set number of tools and each player can customise their own play style – like if they want to play more sneaky or more 'Jack Bauer'.
HS Even the map geometry; often you can go down this street or that street, or over the rooftops, or go in the front of the building or the back of the building, or swim in by possessing a fish. It's not like we're the most non-linear experience ever, but you can still have an outcome that's really violent or really surgical. That throws a lot of modern players for a loop. So you have to spend a lot of time making them feel comfortable and educating them and rewarding them when they do the right thing. I'm not saying that we have the perfect balance of it yet, but that's the thing that occupies us most.
RC That's what we see right now in our playtests. People tend to go for the most direct route and they don't know the options so much. ■





EA's Frank Gibeau gives Governor Rick Perry a tour of BioWare (top). *Dishonored* (above) features an assassin in a steampunk city

Dallas

The birthplace of the FPS continues to breed games with unique perspectives





John O'Keefe, Terminal Reality studio director, and Nancy Beasley, NutriGram project manager

Recalling the moment in 1992 when John Romero, John Carmack, Tom Hall and Adrian Carmack arrived in Texas for the first time, **David Kushner** writes in Masters Of Doom: "Everything in Dallas was big. The trucks were big. The car dealerships were big. Even the people were big, from the towering cowboys to the statuesque blondes."

The id Software guys were finishing up *Wolfenstein 3D* at that point, working out of a rented apartment in the Dallas suburb of Mesquite. And their small business was itself on the verge of exploding into a phenomenon that makes the word 'big' seem like crass understatement. The studio's revolutionary work would trigger the birth of the FPS and lock in the commercial coordinates of the videogame business for years to come.

The legacy of innovation in Dallas's videogame scene doesn't just cover game design and engine technology, however. Id's early publisher Apogee Software – whose founder, Scott Miller, coaxed id into relocating to the Dallas area – holds the distinction of pioneering shareware distribution, an early precursor to the free-to-play model and the now-standard practice of downloadable demos.

Developers who got their start at 3D Realms (the moniker Apogee later adopted) have spawned such studios as Gearbox Software and Terminal Reality, the latter of which is finishing up work on *Kinect Star Wars*. Just like its colleagues down the road at id Software, Terminal Reality continues to push new developments in engine technology with its Infernal Engine.

> Developers who got their start at 3D Realms have spawned key studios such as Gearbox Software

"Our Infernal Engine technology allows us to really get in and work physics and destruction into the player's integral experience," says Terminal Reality studio director **John O'Keefe**, "and have those elements affect how the game is played beyond just a visual treat. We've made forays into this since *BloodRayne*, and ramped it up considerably in *Ghostbusters*. One of the *Kinect Star Wars* modes focuses on big physics and destruction, and we've since worked up a number of concepts that push these elements further."



Dallas continues to build on the legacy established in the early '90s by developers such as id founders John Romero and John Carmack

Microsoft's disbanding of *Age Of Empires* developer Ensemble Studios in 2009 was a tragic blow to the Dallas scene, but the splintering of the studio's talent has given rise to exciting new startups, such as Robot Entertainment (*Orcs Must Die!*, *Hero Academy*). Zynga has acquired two of Ensemble's other offshoots, snapping up Bonfire Studios (now Zynga Dallas) and Newtoy (now Zynga With Friends). With these smaller startups focusing on mobile, social and downloadable games, the Dallas development community has become even more diverse.

For example, Controlled Chaos Media, which formed in 2009 and saw success with *Pocket Fish* on iOS, has recently expanded its reach into serious games with *The Quest To Lava Mountain*. The game was commissioned by The Cooper Institute in partnership with the Texas Department Of Agriculture as part of the NutriGram.org programme, which promotes healthier eating among children. "We really wanted to avoid the mistake of publishing an educational game that was unable to compete with consumer games that students play," says **Nancy Beasley**, NutriGram project manager at The Cooper Institute.

Given the development community's irrepressible spirit, even amid high-profile studio closures, it would seem that Dallas has built its reputation on *Doom* but certainly not gloom.





GEARBOX SOFTWARE
Aaron Thibault
VP of product development



Can you feel Dallas's 20-year-long FPS legacy informing development in the area today?
Absolutely, without a doubt. You had so many companies here – 3D Realms, obviously Gearbox, Nerve. It's interesting, because Ensemble was here doing strategy games, but there was a lot of communication and idea sharing even between the shooter and strategy developers. The point being, you've got GOD Games and Ritual – all these developers who'd honed their skills and paid their dues in shooters over time. To this day, I would put my money on a Dallas developer to make a great shooter. If I was to think about regions and where development teams are, I'd bet on Dallas any day.

Did Texas's gun and military culture inspire early FPS development?
You have some of the world's largest army bases and some of the more critical army bases located here in Texas, starting with, at the top of the list, Fort Hood located in Killeen, right in the heart of Texas. It's the army's installation for rolling out the modern army, and there's a lot of R&D and training that exists professionally in Texas to support that army and military infrastructure. So it's natural that you would find companies here [based on] weapon manufacturing and training, and extending into the virtual side of that as well.

Do you have any regrets about taking over the tortured development of *Duke Nukem Forever*?
It was an amazing experience. Just to start out by being able to say: "We shipped *Duke Nukem Forever*." That alone is worth whatever blood we poured into shipping the game and its final phase. But the truth of the effort we put into it is that we applied smarts and know-how and skill from a group of our technical experts in the company who really know how to ship games. Speaking for myself, I feel very good that we took on that challenge and that we put that feather in our hat. And, as a result, we are able to move into the future with that franchise to do anything else that we might want to. But who knows what the future holds? I have no idea. But I'd say the risks were well worth the rewards that we'll see.

Did bringing Triptych in-house to finish the game feel like helping a wounded comrade in battle?
Absolutely. Dallas is a very close-knit community. Some of the owners of Gearbox had worked at 3D Realms, so they worked very closely with and believed in Triptych and what they would be able to do if we helped give them some stability so they could finish. It's funny, just



yesterday I was talking with one of my colleagues here, David Eddings. We were reminiscing about how we got into the industry and the mindset of various developers. David was relating to me a story about Paul Jaquays, one of the real big talents in the game industry, one of the old-school veterans who had worked with the guys at id and Ensemble. Paul said that his mindset was always shaped by the fact that people had extended a hand to him and brought him up as he was starting out. So he always sought to do the same thing, mentoring anybody who was making an earnest effort to get in and be mentored. We were talking about that in the context of *Duke Nukem* actually. We feel like we were able to do the same thing with a developer that just wanted to finish their missions and see that vision through. And we were able to help with that.



Id Software's *Rage* (top) pushed boundaries with its id Tech 5 engine. Gearbox's *Borderlands 2* (above) is currently in development

Houston

The largest city in Texas has a keen interest in the potential of serious games


Tony Elam, research director at Rice University, launched the Houston Serious Games Consortium in 2003

Last year, a team of four students from Rice University in Houston created a game called *Azmo The Dragon*, which turns a wireless spirometer – a tool used to measure lung capacity – into a gameplay peripheral (we're guessing calling it *Spiro The Dragon* would've raised copyright concerns). For children suffering from asthma, the ritual of blowing into this diagnostic tool provides data that can be used to anticipate the likelihood of an impending attack. Sadly, blowing into a spirometer is a chore that children frequently neglect. In the game, however, blowing into the spirometer helps Azmo burn medieval castles with columns of scorching breath, and the more consistently kids log their readings, the faster they progress. Pretty clever, eh?




Archimage, Inc launched the Playnormous site in 2008 to deliver Flash games that teach kids about nutrition

While Houston lags far behind Austin and Dallas in the size of its commercial videogame sector, serious games are growing rapidly in the area due to the high concentration of universities, the presence of the world-renowned Texas Medical Center – the biggest of its kind in the nation – and the bustling local corporate sphere. And it's not just student projects that are surfacing: Archimage, Inc develops polished Flash games, such as *Lunch Crunch* and *Food Fury*, for its Playnormous Web site, which is designed to help kids learn the importance of proper nutrition. The interactive nature of games makes the medium ideal for helping kids roleplay different scenarios, and millions of dollars are being funnelled via grants into methods of curbing unhealthy behaviours in the younger demographic.

> It's not just student projects: millions are being funnelled into curbing unhealthy behaviours in kids

Rice University research director **Tony Elam** – an insatiable board game collector – created the Houston Serious Games Consortium in 2003 to begin connecting members of the local education and business communities who had an interest in gaming. That network has grown from a few friends in academia to over 250 people across education, health care and local industry.

"Houston's petrochemical industry is exploring the use of virtual environments in a serious way for advanced training," says Elam. "The [Texas] Medical Center now has an interest in games to help with rehabilitation, and there have been multiple gaming projects associated with that. Those things – the petrochemical industry and the Texas Medical Center – they're not in Austin or Dallas, so that's two areas for serious games where we're going to have an advantage just because of the fact that we're physically here."


Due to the concentration of universities in the Houston area, the world-renowned Texas Medical Center and an active corporate landscape, serious games initiatives have flourished here

***Section 8* developer** TimeGate Studios has been operating out of Houston suburb Sugar Land for over a decade. "We have access to the greatness of a large city, only without the headaches, and we can work and live in our own little bubble while still having access to everything the big city provides, including talent," says CEO **Adel Chaveleh**. "There's a lot of talent that we recruit locally from other industries, and now with a direct relationship with University Of Houston, where we're able to – at least partially – shape what that talent looks like on [graduation], that's an even better thing for us longterm."

New blood is coming in, too. Pi Studios, which has worked on huge franchises such as *Call Of Duty* and *Rock Band*, relocated from Plano to Houston in early 2005. And according to Elam, Houston is seeing quite a few two- to four-person mobile app game studios sprouting up, which bodes well for the diversity of projects coming out of the local development community.





TIMEGATE STUDIOS
Adel Chaveleh
President and CEO



Have you ever considered establishing operations outside the Houston area?
The plan was always to set up here, but of course the thought crosses our mind every couple years as we're planning what the next big strategic steps are for us. Sometimes that involves the exploration of setting up satellite offices. As a headquarters, we're pretty deeply rooted where we are for many reasons, but there are times when we've pretty strongly considered setting up satellite teams outside of Houston. But each time we went through the process of those explorations, we always ended up focusing that growth on our studio here. So over the years the growth has continued to happen, but it's all been centralised here.

What was the rationale behind consolidating that growth in Houston?
There are obviously pros and cons to different locations. The pros of setting up a satellite team in, say, Austin or Los Angeles or San Francisco or Dallas – pick one of the big hubs in North America – would be easy access to talent. But with that also comes competition for jobs and a higher cost of living. And some unfamiliar territory, because even though we've travelled to those cities many times over the past 14 years, we've never done business in those cities. We're deeply tapped into the business community here – the government, the city and county, [and] the state support us and our growth efforts. Not financially necessarily, but [with] any tools we need to help build ourselves as a dominant business force here. They're very supportive of those efforts.

Was it difficult to transition from realtime strategy games to shooter development when you made *Section 8*?
One pillar of TimeGate, in terms of the products and IP we've created internally, is that the concept is born first and then we validate it with business. A lot of developers start by chasing the hottest new platform or business model. We just got excited about the *Section 8* concept. At the time, we had no FPS experience, we had no FPS tech, we had no FPS talent, and the genre was starting to get pretty damn crowded. So we thought, 'Perfect, that's exactly what we want; let's go do it!' So we took a big bet, but those are the moments where we stretch our company. So we got that out there, but then we took the next big step of, 'OK, we're going to self-publish our next product.' So the most recent *Section 8* that came out this past year, not only did we develop it but we self-published it, we certed it with all platforms ourselves, we self-financed it, we marketed it ourselves. So it's all about keep growing and keep pushing yourself and make great games along the way.



It sounds like you haven't outgrown your independent streak.
With that said, we're not one of these guys that are running around beating our chest and touting ourselves as keepers of the indie spirit. We obviously believe in that, and have held ownership of our IPs throughout all these years, but a thing like the *Aliens* project that we're working on is an example where if a project comes along that is up our alley and we get excited about it [then] we're going to put a lot of resources behind that kind of project too. *FEAR* was another great example of that. Even though *FEAR* and *Aliens* aren't our IP, they play to our studio's strengths, the team gets really excited about it, and they're adding something to the studio in terms of another big feather in the hat. ■



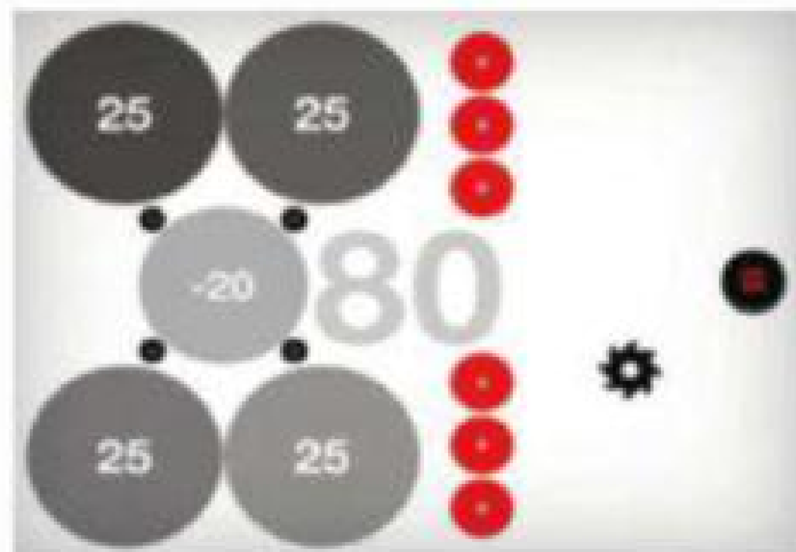
TimeGate is currently working with Gearbox on *Aliens: Colonial Marines* (top), having released instalments of its *Section 8* series

Juegos Rancheros

Austin's new indie gaming collective just wants to show you something awesome









Clockwise from right: Fantastic Arcade meets at Alamo Drafthouse's Highball lounge, Semi Secret's upcoming *Hundreds*, Tiger Style's *Waking Mars* is due soon

INDIE INSIGHT

Adam Saltsman
Co-founder, Semi Secret Software

Brandon Boyer
Founder, Venus Patrol, and IGF chairman





Due to a combination of closures of big-budget Austin game studios in recent years and the newly available digital channels through which indies can sell their work, the city has seen a resurgence in small developers setting up shop. We speak to Semi Secret Software co-founder **Adam Saltsman** and Venus Patrol founder/IGF chairman **Brandon Boyer** about how they're nurturing a community, along with Karakasa Games founder Wiley Wiggins, where indies can meet up, drink a few beers, and get inspired.

First off, the name Juegos Rancheros is loco.

Brandon Boyer It's a stupid pun, and it's kind of silly compared to a lot of other names, but there's something about it that makes it a little more inviting, because it doesn't sound like a serious hardcore nerd game thing. It just sounds like it's a goofy, funny thing about game culture, and we've seen that reflected in the audience that we get in.

Adam Saltsman It's the farthest other end of the spectrum from 'Local Austin Game Developers Business Association', or something like that. Who's going to show up to something called Juegos Rancheros with a stack of business cards, saying, "I'm going to collect some social networking resources today"?

BB There's a lot of academic stuff about games and business stuff about games that a lot of people don't really care about, and they just want to see something awesome. That's always been my emphasis in what I'd like to give them – an awesome show about videogames, most of which they've never seen or heard of before, and just cut out all the rest of the stuff.

How connected were the various indies in Austin prior to Juegos launching?

AS I was hanging out with some artist friends who were at bigger studios, and we would have lunch once in a while. But as those studios folded and people struck out on their own, we went from six or seven people who were trying to independently run companies to make videogames in Austin to like 20, 30 or 40 in the space of a year or two, between roughly 2008 and 2010. But it's still kind of snowballing. I feel like our definition of our community is growing at the same time.

Why didn't these developers just get absorbed back into the existing industry?

BB Austin's indie second wave took off in early 2009-ish and I don't think it's coincidental that it was around this time that the App Store was becoming a viable alternative. I think those early people were people like Tiger Style that had literally just come out of big studios and were saying, "Oh, we can make this iPhone thing possibly work."

AS My whole reason for going independent in the first place was that I was tired of people forcing me to do a worse job. That was a common thing. You turn something in that was really good and they would demand that you make it worse. A lot of people can only do that for so long, but they love what they do. I think if you combine the opportunity of digital distribution and the obvious sustainability problem of big studio development, you just get this really natural springing up of small shops. People were burning out, but they didn't have to leave the industry completely. They were able to set aside a little money and take some risks on creating their own work, which is kind of cool. We talk very little business at Juegos, but there's a community sense of, 'OK, this isn't hopeless.' You can survive, you can eat food, and you can be creatively fulfilled.

Have collaborations between indie devs emerged as a result of the collective?

BB Despite the 'nobody swaps business cards' thing, Juegos has been really good for this. Right out of the gate, Austin newcomer Dale Austin helped Shay Pierce out with artwork for *Connectrode*, then Bobby Arlauskas ended up doing freelance sound work for Tiger Style on *Waking Mars*, which [got] it an IGF audio nod, and most recently, Robin '*Deep Sea*' Arnott ended up topping off the sound for *Capsule*, Adam's soon-to-be-released Venus Patrol game. However indirectly you want to call it, it's hard to see any of that having happened without the group getting together this regularly. ■


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